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**THE
IDEAL
SPONGER
LIFE**



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THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE

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INTRODUCTION

THE SPONGER GETS DRAGGED INTO THE FRAY!

Zenjiro now finds himself embroiled in the **power struggle** of a foreign land.

At first, it seems like **Prince Largo**—younger brother of the crown prince—is after the throne for himself. But further information turns the situation on its head. Rather than vying to secure Prince Josep's claim to the throne, Largo and **King Bruno** mean to install **Prince Francesco** in the soon-to-be vacant position of crown prince.

The young Francesco has the lineal magics of both **enchantment** and **healing**, but the secret concord between the ruling families means that he must be kept from the line of succession. However, the king and crown prince are both part of the **Total Unity Faction**, and they're willing to break the contract to see their unlikely candidate as the future king...

Even Zenjiro's son, **Carlos Zenkichi**, is soon drawn into the intrigue!

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Prologue — Sleeping Alone](#)

[Chapter 1 — Audience](#)

[Chapter 2 — A Private Meeting](#)

[Intermission — A Strategy Meeting](#)

[Chapter 3 — Coming Home and Going Home](#)

[Chapter 4 — Secret Moves in Earnest](#)

[Chapter 5 — Words of Gratitude](#)

[Epilogue — Return After a Month](#)

[Appendix — The Lord and Maids' Spread of Contamination](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Textless Images](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prologue — Sleeping Alone

The grand Kingdom of Capua reigned over the western area of the Southern Continent. Its queen awoke as usual in her bedchamber in the inner palace, unconsciously reaching a hand out across the bed with a murmur.

She was still half asleep and needed to look across to the smaller bed that had once more been brought into the room before she could remember the current situation.

“Ah. Zenjirou is in the Twin Kingdoms,” she muttered before lifting herself from the bed.

Her husband usually slept in the same bed as her. That same beloved husband also slept in a spare bed to reduce any possible risks in her pregnancy. Said husband was currently away in another grand kingdom, the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle, which reigned over the center of the continent.

“Just when did it start to feel so strange to sleep alone?” she mused with a self-deprecating smile.

Her words were not precisely accurate, though. Recently, Zenjirou had been rather busy—he had been in Valentia, then in the Gaziel March, and was now once again away in the Twin Kingdoms.

His stay in the Gaziel March, in particular, had been close to a month. Despite that, she had not longed unconsciously for him as much as she did now.

While this might be her second pregnancy, she *was* still pregnant. Coupled with Zenjirou’s current location being outside of her sphere of influence, she felt subconsciously nervous about the state of affairs. Whatever the case, the lightly clad queen took a silver bell from the bedside and rang it.

“Pardon us,” said the maids as they entered.

In short order, they had the queen out of her nightclothes and a loose dress prepared for her.

“Your Majesty, how would you prefer the shutters?” a maid asked from the window.

Still nude thanks to the other maids’ efforts, the queen considered it before replying. “The air is still rather fresh, so leave them closed. I would rather not have the cool air escape. Put the lights on instead.”

They were currently in the middle of the blazing season. Even at night, the temperature would be above thirty degrees.

The temperature now was already above body temperature everywhere with the exception of their air-conditioned bedroom. Opening the shutters would let all of the cooled air out of the room or let the heat of the outside in.

“Understood,” the maid answered before turning on the floor lamps with practiced movements, illuminating the whole room.

While shutting yourself away and relying solely on artificial light was not the healthiest of lifestyles, it was better than exposing yourself to the elements when you considered the heat. Once the maids had finished fastening the dress to keep pressure off her stomach, the queen spoke to the head maid, Amanda.

“I will be taking my lunch here for the time being. See that it is brought in.”

“Understood, ma’am,” the middle-aged woman replied calmly.

Mealtimes were often synonymous with unofficial negotiations for royalty. Aura therefore usually took her lunches in the royal palace. On the occasions where she ate in the inner palace, it was normally in the dining room. However, she had to prioritize her health—both mental and physical—now. Acclimatized to it or not, the blazing season was a significant burden even on the locals. With her pregnancy, any exposure that could be avoided *should* be.

“I will be checking on Carlos before breakfast.”

The maids all bowed in acknowledgment.

“We will accompany you.”

The young maids flanked the queen as protection. They would usually follow behind her, but they were at her sides to prevent her from falling while pregnant. Aura easily adapting to what her husband would doubtlessly consider

to be suffocating behavior was due to her upbringing as a royal.

They left the air-conditioned room, passing through the living room to the corridor before eventually arriving in the bedroom of the first prince of Capua, Carlos Zenkichi.

When the maids opened the door and the group stepped in, it was pleasantly cool. Of course, it wasn't to the same extent as the royal couple's room with its air conditioning. The constant stream of cool air from fans set up over ice from the freezer meant that the temperature was below thirty, though. In comparison to the usual air temperature being higher than one's body temperature, it was practically paradise.

"Excuse me," the queen said.

"Oh, Your Majesty. Prince Carlos is still asleep," Cassandra, the infant's wet nurse, said quietly as she stood to greet the queen.

"Understood," Aura answered in kind, making her way over to the bed without a noise. Her expression relaxed as she watched him sleeping peacefully. "He seems comfortable," she commented.

"He is," Cassandra nodded. Even so, she didn't forget to mention the concerns she had. "Though this is the only room in which he currently is. I have been removing him from the room for periods that will not harm him, but every time we leave the room in this season, he begins to cry."

"I can certainly sympathize, but that is hardly ideal. You may take it slowly, but ensure he becomes accustomed to the climate."

"I understand."

Prince Carlos was her and Zenjirou's child, so he was naturally in the inner palace with its electronic conveniences. In turn, it also meant that he had no experience living through the season without the aid of the ice and fans. With that said, a count from Earth would put him at a year and a month old, while even using the local system, he was only two. The concerns might be somewhat premature, but it was a problem that should be solved sooner rather than later.

Men were prohibited from the inner palace. All but Zenjirou, who was the lord of the palace. His son, even being a prince, was no exception. All that made

him an exception at present was the fact that he was younger than seven, and boys and girls were considered the same at such ages.

In other words, come what may, Carlos would have to leave the inner palace in another five years. If the only environment he was used to was one of the comforts of modern appliances, the rest of his life would be rather uncomfortable.

“In fact, it may be better to consult with Doctor Michel to stop using the ice such that it will not cause harm. If things continue as they are, Carlos will be unable to live outside of the inner palace.”

If things went as they should, Carlos would be the next king after Aura’s reign. A weakness to heat that saw him shutting himself away in the inner palace during the blazing season was unacceptable. If they didn’t get him used to a life without such conveniences before he was conscious of them, it would be worse for him.

“Though if this new child is a girl, perhaps we ought to be concerned about the opposite,” the queen murmured. She kept her gaze on her son, but softly caressed the visible bump on her stomach.

Boys would leave the inner palace once they were seven, but girls lived there until they were married. If the child she currently bore was female, Aura wanted to bring her up to be as proficient with electronics as possible.

The AC, fridge, and television were one thing—more changes in lifestyle than anything. However, spreadsheet software could be a weapon for the royals, and they had to make sure it was inherited by the coming generations. If the royal family could quickly and accurately check tax calculations from every territory, it would put an immense amount of pressure on the nobles who held those territories.

Aura’s plan was therefore to create a new matrilineal branch family that knew how to use the appliances—particularly the PC—and could maintain them with time reversal.

“I cannot foresee my husband being pleased, but he at least understands.”

Zenjirou was against a child’s birth guaranteeing that she would be destined

for the inner palace. Logically, though, he knew she was correct. The spreadsheet software depended on Japanese, English, and Arabic numerals. It would require a long period of one-on-one tutoring from Zenjirou to become proficient in it. That was only possible for Zenjirou's own daughters, who would be guaranteed to spend a long period within the inner palace.

"Still, no point in worrying until they are born. It is not even a certainty that this *is* a girl," she said, sighing deeply.

Still, if she were being honest, she would prefer her second child to be a girl. If this second child was on schedule, then there would only be two years separating the siblings. While they were currently focusing solely on numbers and therefore sequential pregnancies, several brothers of similar age from the same parents would inevitably be a cause for future contention.

"So I can only pray that you are a girl for more than one reason."

Even the birth of a beloved child had an inescapably political bend to it.

"Truly, our positions thrust these stumbling blocks into even love for a child..." the queen stated with a gloomy sigh before taking a deep breath.

Chapter 1 — Audience

It was noon on the third day since Zenjirou had arrived in the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle. He was currently walking through one of the two royal palaces that the country boasted: the Purple Egg Palace. It was the seat of the Sharou family's power.

As the name implied, the palace was covered in the emblematic purple of the family, with an exotic air flowing from its every surface. However, Zenjirou didn't currently have the wherewithal to inspect his surroundings in that way.

I really am a wreck, he thought to himself. *I can feel myself shaking just from breathing.*

He was currently clad in his unwieldy first uniform and walking down the palace's corridors with clearly rigid steps.

His destination? The audience chamber.

Zenjirou was to have his first official audience with the king of the Twin Kingdoms. Asking him to not be nervous would be an impossible request.

He was surrounded by General Pujol and his men. Lucretia led the way as they approached the large double doors. The audience chamber lay behind them.

It was his third year since arriving in this world, and he was finally to meet someone other than his wife, who held a higher station than him. He forced himself to swallow what little saliva his dry mouth could muster.

"Your Majesty, may I?" Lucretia asked him.

"You may. Open the doors." Thanks to that earlier swallowing, his voice was steady and clear as he replied.

"Excuse me, then." The blonde—Lucretia—spun on her heel, sending her side-tail fluttering to the side. She then touched what must have been a magic tool to the door's side and let her mana flow into it.

It must have been a signal. The two doors opened slowly from the inside.

“Now announcing His Majesty from the Kingdom of Capua, Zenjirou Capua!”

The countless nobles inside turned their attention to him, drawn by the statement as he walked along the purple carpet.

“Follow etiquette and just walk” might sound like a simple request. In fact, it was extremely simple in terms of technical requirements. Even a moderately mature child could do so if they were given a week to learn what was required of them.

However, there was the added requirement that it take place while under the scrutiny of foreign nobility and royalty, and that there be absolutely no deviation from what manners dictated. With those conditions, the difficulty skyrocketed.

It was akin to needing to sprint a hundred-meter track with a width of two meters, all while not putting a single step out of line.

Doing so on normal terrain would be hard to screw up, but add sheer drops on either side and all but the most strong-willed of people would be unable to run at full speed. At the very least, an athlete managing to set a new personal best would get sports scientists clamoring to investigate them.

That was how significantly a person’s mental state influenced their capabilities. Even in the kindest terms, Zenjirou’s mental state was at its limit.

Keep your steps shorter than usual and look straight ahead. Don’t let your head drop, and don’t let it rise either...

He was repeating his tutor’s instructions—those given by Lady Octavia—like a mantra. He was all too aware of every muscle, trying to keep each of them under control as he walked.

Once he finally arrived before the throne, Zenjirou stopped and looked up at the king.

So this is the king from the Sharou family, he mused to himself. He looks pretty young to be Francesco’s grandad.

Even with all the tension he was under, those were Zenjirou’s impressions. The man in the throne had gray in his hair and beard, but his physique hadn’t

deteriorated in the slightest, and he was sitting ramrod straight in the throne.

Zenjirou had been cramming his head full of what information he could about the Twin Kingdoms. If what he'd learned was true, the king was currently over seventy years old. Zenjirou would have pegged him at about sixty at most, though.

He's pushing seventy and still on the throne; of course he'd look young. If he was doddering, he'd have abdicated for his son.

As the thought passed through his mind, the king began to speak quietly as he looked down at Zenjirou.

"Well met. I am the king of the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle, Bruno III. I welcome you to our lands on behalf of the country."

His voice was strong, showing even less sign of his age than his voice. Zenjirou remained standing and nodded slightly back at him.

"My thanks, Your Majesty. I am Queen Aura of Capua's spouse, Zenjirou. I am honored by the opportunity to meet you."



Official audiences like this were about ninety percent set phrases.

“Today is an auspicious day, for royalty to personally visit from a friendly nation.”

“I, too, am blessed with fortune to visit the famed Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle.”

It was an exchange of set phrases rather than thought-out statements. He remembered the line and spoke it. It led to the whole affair feeling more like following a script. Put somewhat harshly, you could say he had let his guard down slightly.

“I pray that you will represent your lands long into the future.”

Mentally, he was already prepared to hear of the king’s appreciation for his hopes. That was why...

“I truly appreciate your words, but I am afraid those prayers will be unanswered.”

The only response he could give to the unforeseen response was a noise of confusion. It was a decidedly bad action to take in public, let alone in front of another nation’s king. Fortunately, though, no one there would fault him for it.

“I have reached a good age, and I believe I will soon be abdicating the throne.”

The various generals and lords assembled in the room all raised their voices in shock as the room descended into disarray.

“Your Majesty?!”

“This is news to us!”

“What in the world?”

“What do you intend for the balance with the Gilbelle Papacy?”

Judging by the shocked questions, Bruno’s declaration was a bolt from the blue to more than just Zenjirou. It had shocked the nobles as well.

Zenjirou kept facing forward but surveyed the room as best he could while only moving his eyes. Everyone was in some state of shock, but he noticed that

a man near the throne looked oddly calm. He was in the latter half of his forties and was wearing clothes that were a deep purple. This was a royal from the direct line.

Is this Crown Prince Josep? Prince Francesco's father and King Bruno's son would make the ages line up.

If the king abdicated, he would be the next on the throne. There was a distinct possibility that he had informed the crown prince—and no one else—ahead of time.

The tumult continued for a while, but the king raised a hand from his throne for silence and silence fell before too long. With their gazes piercing him, the elderly king spoke in a dignified tone.

“Your surprise is warranted. Discussing a change in the throne is somewhat reckless even for the king. However, the years are mounting and the crown is getting rather heavy for my old bones.”

“How could you say that, Your Majesty?! You are still in your prime!” A middle-aged man had interjected against the king’s claim of his age. This man was also close to the throne and wearing purple.

Who is it? Zenjirou thought to himself. I know he's part of the Sharous because of the outfit, but I've not memorized the entire family.

Unlike Capua’s nigh-extinct family from the war, the Twin Kingdoms’s royal families were great in number. Unfortunately, Zenjirou would be unable to memorize all of them.

He turned his attention to this new royal. The man looked around thirty-five and maintained the decorum he needed to in front of the throne, but there was a clearly wild look in his eye. Even Zenjirou could tell at a glance that he was not welcoming of King Bruno’s proclamation.

“Your Majesty, I beg you to reconsider. Our country still needs you.”

“No, it does not. Our country has a surfeit of young talent. I hardly believe I am indispensable.”

“But...”

The king wanted to abdicate, and a royal wished to stop him. A simplistic read on the situation would imply that it was simply how much he respected the king. The interpersonal relations between the movers and shakers of a big power like this were hard to confine like that, though.

Just from my rough impressions, King Bruno and Crown Prince Josep have a close relationship, right? Prince Josep was born to the king's legitimate wife as well. I've also heard that he's shown himself to be accomplished in both enchanting and statecraft. No one has raised any real concerns about his personality. Frankly, I doubt there'd be much of a fight for the throne...

He was the next legitimate offspring in line and had no real issues with either his skills or personality. The crown prince fulfilling those conditions meant that it would be impossible to question his right of succession. With that in mind, the strange reaction was not on the part of the royal urging the king to reconsider, but on the king for suddenly announcing his abdication.

It'd normally go off without a hitch, so why is he purposefully causing waves like this? Does he intend to install someone other than Prince Josep to the throne?

Zenjirou's thoughts were put to rest by the king's next statement.

"Josep already carries out over half of the nation's politics on my behalf. There will be little difference in officially handing him the crown. Or do you mean to say, Largo, that you object to Crown Prince Josep taking the throne?"

The man in his thirties frantically denied the accusation from the glaring king. "Not at all, Your Majesty! Josep is the only choice."

The conversation at least implied that Josep would indeed be next on the throne. The king calling the other man by name also allowed Zenjirou to place the fellow.

Prince Largo. I'm pretty sure he's the king's youngest. He's Prince Josep's half brother and thirty-five if I remember right. Prince Josep's forty-eight or forty-nine, so about thirteen, fourteen years between them?

Zenjirou dragged out the information from his past three days of memorization. That said, it didn't shed any further light on the situation. Capua

was in the west, and the Twin Kingdoms were in the center of the continent, so there was too much distance between them to have solid information.

Zenjirou had only been here for three days. He had gathered information from the soldiers who had preceded him, but it was honestly hard to call it sufficient.

“Agreeing with my brother’s ascension and your own abdication are separate things though, Your Majesty. Why have you announced it so suddenly and in such a setting?”

“Josep will be enthroned either way. Accelerating things to suit my own circumstances causes no issues. You agree with his ascension regardless. I am aware that your words come from a position of respect. Still, continuing to make these claims will give our esteemed guest a mistaken impression.”

The king’s low comment made the prince suddenly look towards Zenjirou. His face flattened into expressionlessness as he gave a polite bow.

“Excuse me, Your Majesty,” he addressed Zenjirou. “I apologize for my carelessness.”

His manners were perfect, and his expression was an excellent poker face. However, Zenjirou noticed a slight twitch on the man’s cheek. He was probably clenching his teeth to hold his emotions in check.

“Not at all. I can only envy your openness with each other in the Sharou family for the sake of your country,” Zenjirou replied. He had a smile all but saying that he understood nothing of the situation, and his phrasing was somewhat vague.

Of course, it was mostly true that he understood nothing of the situation, so the smile was not necessarily an act. The conversation also allowed him to realize something else.

I don’t know why he’s doing it, but I know why he’s doing it now. He’s taking advantage of me being here!

More precisely, Zenjirou was a living witness. The Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle had the peculiarity of two royal families with two heads of state, but they were still feudalistic. Heads of state in such countries were not as all-

powerful as often thought. If the influential nobles of the land united against the king, it was far from uncommon for the king's desires to be unfulfilled.

If those selfsame nobles conspired to continually press the king to continue, there was a significant possibility the king would need to compromise. Announcing it here, though, turned the situation on its head. Zenjirou was, for all his faults, royalty from a major country that ruled the west of the continent. The king had made his proclamation in front of him in an official capacity.

Despite contesting the king's power, even the self-professed loyal nobility would maintain that stance publicly. They could not break that facade in front of foreign royalty, and there was no room to both keep that stance *and* protest the legitimate heir's ascension.

Therefore, though it had been done high-handedly, the king's abdication and the crown prince's coronation were unanimously accepted. From the king's perspective, it was a vital blow.

Zenjirou understood it rationally. He truly did, but his honest impression on the matter was very different.

That doesn't mean you need to drag me into it! This is going to be such a pain!

His thoughts were naturally ones of despair over this turn of events.



While it was not quite “without incident,” Zenjirou had managed to finish his audience with King Bruno and return to his annex. He was joined by the head of his security detail—General Pujol—as they discussed the earlier events.

“I do not know the full circumstances,” the general said, “but the reason for Prince Largo's reticence is simple. He simply wishes to be king himself.”

Zenjirou shifted in the still unfamiliar foreign seat as he listened to the general's unconcerned report.

“Hm? I cannot see how. Surely Crown Prince Josep is to be the next king regardless. With the lack of detriment in such a plan, I see no way for his younger brother to become king.”

He then awaited the huge general's reply from the other sofa. While the

general's political acumen could not be described as exactly stellar, he had spent a month with the soldiers and knights of the Twin Kingdoms. He, therefore, had some insight into the situation in the country.

Whether he was aware of Zenjirou's internal musings, General Pujol heaved his massive shoulders into a shrug before giving a concise answer. "While there is no detriment in Crown Prince Josep ascending to the throne currently, his age will be in another ten years. King Bruno may already be in his seventies, but he is still hale in his old age. It is by no means impossible for him to last another ten years and still hold the throne in his eighties. The rumors hold that Prince Largo's hope rests on that."

"I see, so it is a matter of age." He could accept the general's explanation on the whole. For most brothers, succession was determined by seniority. That was the case across the entire Southern Continent, but there were instances where that did not hold true when the older sibling was significantly past their prime.

The current king, Bruno, was currently seventy. The crown prince, Josep, was forty-nine. On the other hand, Prince Largo was thirty-five and had his eyes on the throne.

If the succession happened immediately, then the crown prince would be easily seen as being in the prime of his life. The usual reign of a king was around ten years, and if he followed King Bruno's example and held the position until he was seventy, then he would be there for twice that time.

If, however, this happened ten years later, he would be fifty-nine while Prince Largo would be forty-five. There would inevitably be unease at a nearly sixty-year-old "new" king. Having the new king then be the younger prince would raise no real eyebrows at that point.

"Could the crown not then skip a generation?" Zenjirou asked.

The crown could pass not from father to son, but from grandfather to grandson. That would entirely miss the one generation. In a situation like the current one, where a single king had remained on the throne until they were elderly, that ought to be possible.

However, the general shook his head. "That would be difficult. Crown Prince

Josep has seven children between his wife and concubines. Unfortunately, though, only two are male. As you are aware, Sir Zenjirou, one of them is Prince Francesco. He is twenty-five, so there is no issue with his age, but he has no place in the line of succession due to his character. The other male is Prince Vittore, who is currently seven. Fortunately, he was also born to Crown Princess Tosca, but he will barely be an adult even after another decade. It would be unlikely for the crown to pass directly to him from King Bruno.”

“So the length of his reign is the issue here,” Zenjirou mused. Internally, he was impressed that the crown princess had had children around twenty years apart.

“It is,” the general agreed. “It is rather ironic from our own perspective. Whether the reign is long or short, whether there are many royals or few, there are still endless problems.”

The steady, almost fifty-year reign under a single king, coupled with the excessive number of royals, led to the subordinate members of the Sharou family contending for the crown. In contrast, the Capuan royal family was too small, having had three kings that served for less than a year during the war along with losing much of the family in the same conflict.

Comparing the two situations truly brought home how difficult it was to keep the circumstances stable.

“I understand much of the situation. Yet to think I would become involved with the domestic problems of the Twin Kingdoms...” Zenjirou frowned.

The general raised an eyebrow, looking slightly amused as he answered. “I would wager King Bruno has few external assets to hand. The majority of international negotiations are dealt with by the Gilbelle family.”

“So the Sharou family deals with domestic matters and the Gilbelle family with international matters?” Zenjirou mumbled as he considered his basic knowledge of the country.

“Indeed. The Sharou family therefore has few opportunities to officially meet foreign royalty. To say nothing of royalty like yourself, of such a pivotal country. I would say it was quite the windfall for King Bruno.”

While they may all be called “royalty,” there were clear distinctions in status. The small countries around the Twin Kingdoms were financially dependent on the latter, so many of them were effectively satellite nations. Those countries may technically be kingdoms, but even their kings were often of lower effective station than the nobles of the Twin Kingdoms.

Of course, even a larger country’s royalty of some dead-end branch family would add no real pressure. In comparison, Zenjirou was both royalty of a country that stood on the same level as the Twin Kingdoms *and* was close to its core, being the queen’s spouse. Royalty and nobility of the Twin Kingdoms alike would find it difficult to renege on a statement made in front of him.

“I understand it logically, but that does not make it any more pleasant.” Zenjirou sighed.

The general’s mouth twisted up into a smile. “You are right. However, this could be quite the opportunity. Whichever way he explains it, the fact remains that he will owe you. You could perhaps stress that and gain aid in your own goals?”

Zenjirou couldn’t help but give a reluctant grin at the general’s blunt suggestion. “Quite so, but it has already happened now. He need only feign ignorance.”

The king had already succeeded in his goal, so bringing up any debt would be difficult.

Pujol’s grin took on an audacious gleam as he disagreed. “You perhaps speak too hastily. King Bruno announced that he would abdicate in the near future. What would you see as ‘the near future?’”

Zenjirou inclined his head at the implication-laden words and thought. “Well...I would say within the year. Though succession is a particularly important matter, so longer. In which case, more than a year, but less than two.”

The general gave an exaggerated look of surprise. “Oh, you took it as between a single year and two years? Personally, I thought that succession would take around three years. If the two of us have such different viewpoints, perhaps the royalty and nobility of the Twin Kingdoms may see the near future as within the

next five years. Perhaps even within the next ten, depending on the circumstances.”

“Ah. I see.”

Zenjirou let out a deep sigh as he understood the implication. King Bruno had explicitly promised that the throne would pass to Crown Prince Josep in the near future. However, the “near future” needed to be defined in a more concrete fashion.

The general’s claim was that Zenjirou would have the strongest say in what that definition would be, as he had been a large part of the impetus. If Zenjirou asked when it would happen and that he had assumed the king had meant next year, he could push the view that “the near future” meant “within the year.”

The example of a decade, which the general had given—along with inside a month on the other end of the scale—were clearly absurd time limits. If he kept the times to more reasonable time frames, though, he could quite possibly influence what “the near future” became.

Hm? Then surely he could have just given a definite time frame in the first place? Why would he be so vague about it? If he’s as wise and great as they say, surely he’d have seen that...

He thought it over briefly to come to a simple conclusion.

Maybe it was a purposeful concession?

Things generally lined up on that front. It had all felt off in the first place. Zenjirou’s visit was—on his part—to make arrangements for a healer before his and Aura’s second child was born. At the same time, the Sharou family should have been angling to have Zenjirou—or his dual heritage of the Capua and Sharou families—as part of their own country.

Despite that, the first meeting had been a surprise attack taking advantage of him. No one enjoyed being used in such a way. Considering they would want him to take a concubine from their lands and get her pregnant, making him ill-disposed to them would be a bad move.

I just don’t know enough, and thinking about it isn’t going to get me anywhere.

Zenjirou had just given up on theorizing and let out another sigh when there was a knock at the door.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Excuse me, Sir Zenjirou,” the soldier answered. “Lady Lucretia wishes to see you. Would you be willing?”

Lucretia was the name of one of the few people from the Twin Kingdoms Zenjirou could easily bring to mind despite only having been there for three days. She was a daughter of the Broglie family—and also Zenjirou’s mediator during his stay.

“I would. Ines, apologies for the short notice, but prepare the area. General Pujol, you may leave.”

“At once, sir.”

“Excuse me.”

The maid standing ready at his back and the general sitting in front of him both moved briskly in accordance with Zenjirou’s statement.

Around thirty minutes passed after that. The person sitting on the sofa opposite him was now a slight girl with a blonde side-tail rather than the burly general.

While she was seated with all the poise and dignity she should have, her legs were clearly too short to reach the floor, and her feet hung in the air instead. Her innocent smile made her look rather young, but she was still a grown woman.

Of course, calling a fifteen-year-old a “grown woman” wasn’t something Zenjirou could really comprehend with his lingering sensibilities from Earth. Either way, this world’s customs meant that he had to treat her as an adult regardless.

“Apologies for the wait, Lucretia,” Zenjirou said, keeping his expression as smooth as he could.

“Not at all, Your Majesty,” the girl replied, shaking her head along with her tied-up hair. “Conversely, I wish to thank you for accepting my sudden request.”

“It was nothing major,” he answered. “So, what did you wish to discuss?”

As he spoke, Zenjirou’s gaze flickered to the maid standing behind Lucretia. She was holding a sealed bundle of drake parchment. It was likely written invitations.

Now that he had officially met with the king, the Twin Kingdoms’s nobility would have immediately moved towards interacting with him. He couldn’t exactly welcome it, but Zenjirou had been prepared for it.

However, despite noticing his look, Lucretia started with a slightly different topic than he had expected.

“Your Majesty, I wish to offer apologies in King Bruno’s place for the unsightly display during the audience today,” she said with a polite bow of her head.

Zenjirou raised a hand. “Not at all. The matter needs no apology from you, Lucretia. Do not let it concern you,” he said with as cheery a smile as he could.

Of course, the tone he used was soft as well, but it was a clear refusal of her apology. It was hardly a surprise. If he let such treatment go—even from a king—simply due to words from a noble girl, he would be looking down on his own position.

His response seemed to be roughly what she had expected, as her expression remained mostly the same as she continued. “Very well. King Bruno has requested an audience in regard to the matter at a later date. Flora.”

“Here,” her maid answered, taking the top sheet from the sheaf she held and passing it neatly to Lucretia.

She took it and after ensuring that the addressee and such was correct passed it back to the maid. Lucretia’s maid kept a polite pace as she walked over to the sofa Zenjirou was sitting on and offered the invitation to him.

“I will accept this,” Ines answered, taking the invitation from where she waited behind Zenjirou.

She checked the parchment with practiced movements and broke the seal once Zenjirou indicated his permission. She spread it in front of him.

Much of the drake parchment in Capua was a light green, but this sheet was

cream in color, perhaps due to differences in the drakes that went into them.

“If you wish, I could read it aloud?” Ines suggested.

“If you would,” Zenjirou agreed.

His practice thus far meant that he could more or less read the words. However, he didn’t believe he could deal with official documents alone if they required absolutely no mistakes in reading.

“Excuse me, then. ‘To honored noble Zenjirou, having traveled great distances to...’”

The contents—beginning with the long preface—were more or less what Zenjirou had understood from his own perusal of the parchment. Essentially, the king wanted a private meeting to offer his explanations and apologies for the incident during the public audience.

Feeling slightly like he was being tricked, Zenjirou softly traced his finger along the words. He then inspected the finger, but no ink had transferred to it.

“I see. Very well. I wish to tell King Bruno that I deeply appreciate his interaction being fast enough that it could turn back time.”

“I understand,” she answered with a smile after inspecting him with her blue eyes for a long moment. “I shall inform him of precisely that.”

She likely understood the implication he was making. The ink used on drake parchment did not normally dry particularly quickly. At the very least, if it had been written immediately after the audience today, it would not have been completely dry.

Zenjirou had just confirmed that this ink was bone dry, though. Inevitably, that meant the invitation had been written before the audience. And yet, it focused on explaining the incident from that day.

While Zenjirou kept a smile on his face, he was sighing mentally. *So the whole thing went how he planned. I’ve got a headache thinking about what’s going to happen.*

It was only to be expected from a king who had reigned for close to fifty years. Who knew how far things would go if Zenjirou let his guard down.

As he had the realization again, Zenjirou centered himself and brought his attention back to the girl in front of him. “So, can I assume that the rest of your business is similar invitations?”

“You are quite correct. Flora, hand them over.”

“At once, ma’am.”

The invitations followed the same route as the previous one: from Flora to Ines, then from Ines to in front of Zenjirou.

The invitation from the king was one thing, but Zenjirou couldn’t open the rest from the other royals and nobles here. Instead, he just checked the senders of several of the sheets from the top.

Dukes Elehalieucco, Reierfon, Elementaccato, and Animeeum. Man, I knew it was coming, but the four dukes? The dukes here don’t usually leave their own territory, so these are probably from proxies in the capital.

Zenjirou let out yet another mental sigh at the big names he’d been expecting. Despite only having a hasty smattering of knowledge concerning the Twin Kingdoms, even he knew the four dukes’ names.

While The Kingdom of Capua and The Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle were both kingdoms, there were many slight differences. One of them was the relative importance of the title of “duke.”

There were generally two circumstances the title of duke would be used: for a royal and for a noble. Capua only ever used it in the royal sense, while the Twin Kingdoms took the other option. In the royal sense, duke was a title given to a near-direct relation of royalty. In a noble sense, though, it was the highest rank that could be given.

The four dukes who had sent Zenjirou these invitations were dukes in that latter sense. Naturally, their influence was vast. The practical matters of wealth and political capital were, of course, factors. However, even in their official positions, they were beaten only by the Crown Prince of the Sharou Kingdom and the Pope Presumptive of the Gilbelle Papacy.

Outside of the two monarchs and heirs, even the royal families could be called inferior.

When considering the country's history, it was perhaps to be expected. The four dukes were patriarchs of their tribes and dwelled in the desert in the center of this continent. The tribes were vast in scale, with many a gallant warrior. Unfortunately, they did not possess lineal magics. While it may not have been an issue on the Northern Continent, it was a fatal flaw on the southern.

On the Southern Continent, the succession of royalty was determined by the inheritance of lineal magic. However loud they were, the surrounding nations would never recognize them as royalty. Likewise, their lands were not seen as countries. They were seen as naught but wandering nomads of the desert, without even a country to their name. They were naturally then treated as inferior by a level or two by the surrounding nations.

Then, the refugees had arrived from the Northern Continent, led by the Sharou and Gilbelle families. Having fled the Northern Continent, they inevitably had no place of their own here. It was unavoidable. The Southern Continent's norm was dark hair and skin, so the fair-skinned and haired group were obtrusive.

Their fleeing didn't end even after their arrival here, and then they arrived in the great desert that covered the center of the continent. The effective rulers of it—the Four Tribes—had no lineal magics, and it was therefore not seen as a country. The Sharou and Gilbelle families had fled from the Northern Continent and therefore had nowhere safe of their own.

Both camps, after various complications, had taken each others' hands and formed a new country in the sands. Its name? The Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle.

Considering the circumstances of the country's founding, it was practically inevitable that the Four Tribes were practically on par with the two families. After all, the land that had formed the foundations of this country was their territory. Even now, their lands were far larger than the Twin Kingdoms's in both size and population.

Of course, the Sharou and Gilbelle held the unquestionable trump cards of enchantment and healing and so were overwhelmingly wealthier.

Lucretia seemed to realize Zenjirou recognized the dukes' signatures. "Your visit is a privilege without compare to the Twin Kingdoms, Your Majesty. Naturally, everyone wishes to meet you."

The exaggerated speech from the blonde girl emphasized the country welcoming him.

"So it would seem," he answered as he let his eyes drop to the thick pile of parchment. He purposefully allowed a strained smile.

The girl gave a bright smile of her own in response. "Though with that said, there is certainly a difference in fervor. While some will come to visit personally, others will send proxies. I hope you can see it as simply a difference in ardor," she said in a slightly lighter tone.

"I see..." In contrast, Zenjirou's voice was lower than normal. He wasn't acting; he genuinely felt warier.

The dukes were each lords of their own vast territory, practically kings of independent monarchies. That was why they remained in those territories, with only representatives in the capital.

Despite the invitations being to their estates in the capital, it was unlikely any of them would be present.

So is that a sign I can put them off? What on Earth?

He completely lacked the requisite information as each of them contacted him with their own agendas, with his own capacity being already close to overflowing. That aside, it was not something he could think his way through here.

He pulled himself together and looked through the rest of the senders. His cramming meant that he knew the names like Prince Largo's—the man who had caused much of the uproar in the audience. However, the other nobles' names were completely alien to him.

There was also a name that he was expecting to see that was instead absent.

Nothing from Crown Prince Josep, then? Maybe he'll sit in with the king? That'd make it definite collusion between the two. That's not exactly surprising,

though...

There was another name that Zenjirou was expecting to see that he didn't.

"Lucretia?" he asked.

"Yes, what is it, Your Majesty?"

She seemed to lack timidity in its entirety as she simply smiled innocently.

Zenjirou looked pointedly at the collected invitations before voicing his misgiving. "I do not see an invitation from Marquis Broglie."

"Indeed. As you can see, there are many from all levels of society who wished to give their own invitations, so our family refrained. Instead, as I am stationed with you for your stay, I will be a proxy for the marquis. If you have business with the family, I would welcome you speaking through me."

"I see."

He recalled that even the lowest-ranked signatures were those of counts.

I guess they were pretty carefully selected, even with how many there are.

People of low status, weaker families who went through their superiors, and those like the marquis who already had people close to Zenjirou, had been excluded from this selection of invitations.

"Then please thank the marquis for your assistance during my stay."

"I certainly will." She smiled happily.





It was about an hour later. Zenjirou was in the innermost room of his borrowed annex. He had expelled his guards and was accompanied by only his trusted maids from the inner palace.

“I’m exhausted...”

Ines smiled at the flood of emotion in his short statement before offering him some appreciation. “You did well, Sir Zenjirou. Do you wish to change?”

“If you would,” he replied with a relieved expression.

Ines signaled a younger maid with a look and they stood on either side of him.

Zenjirou was currently wearing the first uniform of the Capuan royal family. Of course, he wasn’t wearing the sword belt and ornamental sword that went with it, but everything else was the same.

Unlike the third uniform he usually wore, it was much harder for someone to take it off alone. He was almost like a dress-up doll as he stood. It was like a magic show as they stripped him of the outfit.

Fortunately, he had no further plans. Now in his underwear, Zenjirou immediately changed into loungewear—a T-shirt and cotton pants he’d brought from Japan—before slumping back into the chair.

As he did, Ines perfectly timed pouring water into a metal chalice to offer him.

“Thanks,” he said, offering his usual reply of appreciation before downing the drink.

They were in the middle of the blazing season. However, the Purple Egg Palace was the stronghold of the Sharou enchanters. It had tools that created mist and wind to both cool and humidify the air, so it barely felt like the hottest season. The soldiers said that it was a different type of difficulty than Capua’s hot and humid climate.

Therefore, Zenjirou’s current sweat and thirst were not due to the physical environment. Instead, it was just how much the earlier discussions had exhausted him.

Unlike in the inner palace he called home, there was no fridge. The water came from deep veins of water in the earth, though, so it was still relatively cold.

“Phew, I needed that.”

The drink had restored his willpower. He sat back properly in the chair before speaking to the middle-aged maid with an air of complaint.

“The internal politics of the country are complicated. Honestly, I’ve not got a clue where to even begin.”

“The Twin Kingdoms do indeed have their idiosyncrasies. Both in terms of two families ruling a single nation and a population of indigenous peoples centering on the four dukes living in the same countries as the migrants from the Northern Continent. I am rather impressed that such a state has continued for centuries while remaining essentially a single country.”

“For sure.” Zenjirou nodded. The more he learned, the stranger it felt that it was a single country.

“There are the migrants who follow the royal families, and the desert natives who follow the four dukes. I’ve heard about the conflict between the families under the surface, and I know the four dukes have power struggles of their own. There is division within the Sharou family itself, with Prince Largo opposing the king and crown prince. I truly doubt that even the Twin Kingdoms’s nobility grasps the full extent of the conflict, let alone a foreigner like yourself,” Ines told him.

“The politics here are inscrutable as anything,” Zenjirou replied, face sour. The conversation brought back part of his earlier discussion with Lucretia and her behavior. “So do you think that Lucretia’s harshness towards the four dukes could have been part of that antagonism between the immigrants and natives?”

She had intimated that while some people would see him personally, others would send proxies and that it was due to a difference in the strength of their feelings. The four dukes were in their own lands and would inevitably send proxies. It was clearly said to lower their importance in his eyes, so it could have been born of that.

While Ines nodded in agreement, she still pointed out other possibilities. “That is certainly likely. However, I have heard that ethnic conflict is a more moderate point of contention amongst those that exist, so it would be best not to assume. The royal families are certainly excepted from this due to explicitly aiming to preserve their lineal magics, but I have also heard that almost all the noble families have intermarried with the tribes at least once or twice during their history.”

“I see. The country’s still been around for centuries, so there’d be a lot of mixing going on.”

“Indeed. Of course, there were also over a hundred times as many natives when the country was formed. Outside of the capital, much of the general population is descended purely from the desert tribes.”

“You’re knowledgeable about this,” Zenjirou remarked, a quizzical look on his face at the far more detailed explanation than he’d expected.

Ines laughed slightly. “I heard it from the knights and soldiers. The soldiers spent a month with those of this country on the way from Capua, after all. There were a fair few men who were more than willing to discuss things,” she said, revealing her sources.

Zenjirou smacked a fist into his open palm. “Oh, right. We arrived instantly with magic, but most of the guards spent a month marching with the soldiers from the Twin Kingdoms.”

The path between the two kingdoms was known to be a harsh one. It was inevitable that such a journey would lead to friendliness across the borders. The unconscious information exchange between the subordinates was nothing to be ignored. In a certain light, it was the most accurate view of the internal politics of the nation.

“Can you keep up with the information gathering from the soldiers, then? I’ll cover meals between them as an expense. Oh, make sure they don’t realize it’s information gathering, though. I doubt our men could hide it from the Twin Kingdoms if they knew.”

The maid gave a soft smile and indicated her understanding as Zenjirou emphasized that it was—at least publicly—solely to build relations between

their soldiers.

“In which case, would you be willing to appoint Sir Natalio to collect the information from the knights? Kate can keep contact with him and it would not appear suspicious from observation.”

Zenjirou’s sole personal knight, Natalio Maldonado, and Kate Maldonado of the maids were, as their names implied, siblings. The brother and sister taking the opportunity to meet frequently after the years Kate had spent in the inner palace would seem entirely natural.

“Mm, you can deal with the specifics. I need more information before I can do anything anyway. Ideally, I’d just get the contract in place and race off back to Capua,” Zenjirou said with a sigh.

“That would be impossible currently,” Ines said with a pitying smile.

“Yeah, I know,” Zenjirou answered, slumping.

He’d been well and truly tied up in the succession race in a very public manner. It’d be best to assume that he wouldn’t be able to leave until there was at least a rough road map for how the succession would take place.

“Whatever else, the private discussion with King Bruno comes first. I need to see how he acts there or I won’t be able to find any compromise with him.”

“Indeed. I shall be there and aid you to the best of my ability.”

“Yeah, please do.”

Zenjirou felt nothing wrong with assigning what was essentially a secretary’s role to a mere maid. He simply smiled back at her.

Chapter 2 — A Private Meeting

A monarch calling for a private meeting with royalty from another nation required a certain level of preparation. It was therefore two days later that the meeting between Prince Consort Zenjirou of the Kingdom of Capua and King Bruno III of the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle was held.

He was escorted to the meeting by around a dozen people, but only five were permitted into the room. The five people in question were Ines and the young maid Kate. As for guards, there was his knight, Natalio, the supervisor of his guard force as a whole—General Pujol—along with a young battalion commander Zenjirou was not particularly familiar with.

With the five men and women at his back, Zenjirou seated himself on a sofa. The sofa opposite him was occupied by a white-haired old man—King Bruno—and a middle-aged man who looked in his forties to the king's left.

So Crown Prince Josep is here too, then.

"Thank you for your invitation today, King Bruno, Prince Josep," Zenjirou began.

"Not at all, thank *you* for taking the time, Your Majesty," the king answered.

"Pardon our interruption, Your Majesty."

"Not at all, Your Highness. I am honored to meet not just with His Majesty but yourself as well."

The three royals finished exchanging their greetings. Crown Prince Josep's attendance hadn't been on the invitation but was expected nonetheless. The older man's lips lifted into a smile at Zenjirou's lack of surprise.

"Now, they always say that those with not long to live should avoid being rash, but that is just my nature. Despite the rudeness, I would like to start with the main topic, Your Majesty."

"I do not mind," Zenjirou answered with the best smile he could manage as

the king dispensed with the bland pleasantries. “In fact, I would personally prefer that as well.”

He, too, would rather not sit through the pointless chatter. While the introductions could be indispensable for those with insight and negotiation abilities like Rafaello Márquez and the new Lady Guillén, it was not so for Zenjirou. With the level of observation those two had, the conversation before the negotiation served well for both information gathering and sharing. Zenjirou had only been a royal for three years, though, so he didn’t have the skills necessary for the delicate conversations.

The king seemed satisfied at the answer, nodding shortly before beginning to speak. “Before anything else, I wish to apologize for the incident during our initial audience.”

“I would also like to apologize for the lack of warning,” the crown prince added.

The two local royals lowered their heads—albeit only slightly. It went without saying that this was an exceptional rarity. Private though the meeting may be, Zenjirou was not the only one in attendance. The two maids were one thing, but the men there to guard him all had somewhat higher positions in Capua. There would likely be no hiding that both the current and next king of the Twin Kingdoms had lowered their head to the prince consort of Capua. Of course, it *was* a private meeting, so it wouldn’t form the basis of an actual hierarchy between the two nations. Still, it would have an undeniable influence.

I see. So it’s a genuine apology. They’re giving it as compensation so that I’ve got the achievement of receiving a full apology from the king and crown prince.

An apology in front of people, even ostensibly given in private, was not a thing that would be hidden. Fussing over the events even further would make things more complicated.

“I thank you both for saying so, Your Majesty, Your Highness.”

With Zenjirou’s main goal in negotiations not being an absolute maximum profit, but instead forestalling future problems, his answer was an agreement to not pursue the matter further. Though with that said, this wasn’t the end of it.

“I take it that we can consider this matter closed, then?” Zenjirou asked.

As he’d expected, the other two royals both gave rueful smiles and disagreed.

“No,” the king replied. “Revealing the circumstances only partially will simply cause further problems. I believe that at this point, we should lay things bare and explain.”

You could tell they were father and son as Josep picked up the thread with only a change in voice to indicate a different speaker.

“We would like to explain the position we are in to you here, Your Majesty.”

Right. The apology’s just for the surprise attack and getting me involved. The thing I’m involved in now, though, is still ongoing.

The realization that there would be no getting out of it actually strengthened Zenjirou’s resolve. He straightened himself in his seat and spoke firmly.

“Very well. I shall listen.”

It went without saying that a royal family would not completely open up about their internal affairs to a member of another royal family. King Bruno’s explanation—as much as he called it “laying things bare”—was primarily the official stance on things.

“The initial problem is that my reign has been too long. A single king on the throne for fifty years begins to make those around the throne see it as a given. Of course, they are no fools. Even a king is not undying and they are well aware that a single king cannot reign for eternity. However, when the situation develops well, people start to hope that the current situation—that is, my reign—will last just that little longer. Some even hope that it will last as long as they live.”

“I see.” King Bruno’s explanation was a relatively good public reason. It was by no means a lie either. Therefore, it was rather convincing even to Zenjirou’s ear. “I can certainly understand your subjects wishing for your reign to continue for even a day longer.”

“Indeed. I find myself unable to simply deny the feelings engendered by loyalty towards me. However, as I have always said, I am not immortal. When I

consider passing away after my reign has become almost solidified, it seems prudent to pass on the crown while I still can. Even if it should cause some upheaval as it happens.”

Naturally, though, the flowery reason he had given was not the only one causing the nobility to balk. There were people hoping to defer it so that they could sit on the throne themselves. Others had built connections with Bruno but not with the crown prince, so they would not welcome a change of rule. Some may even be seditious enough to hope for unrest to break out across the country due to the succession.

With that said, a foreign royal like Zenjirou inquiring about it would have him stuck in the muck of the situation.

Then again, it already feels like I’ve got both feet firmly in the muck already, he mused to himself.

Diverting the negative train of thought, Zenjirou spoke. “I understand the depth of thought you have put into this, Your Majesty. I can only marvel in awe at the deliberation you have for the future of your country. As ashamed as I am to admit it, I find that when I consider my own beloved wife’s health, my mind is capable of little else,” he said with an exaggerated mopping of his brow. His implication was simple: “I came here for a healer for my wife. Until I can get a firm promise on that, I have no intention of furthering your goals” was the fundamental thrust of what he was saying.

The elderly king guffawed, easily inferring what Zenjirou meant. “I see the royal couple of Capua lives up to its reputation. Truly, I am jealous. You need not worry, though. We have already spoken to the Gilbelle Papacy. Preparations are in order for one of their healers to visit Capua for a month around Her Majesty’s expected delivery date.”

The good news was far from what he had expected.

“Truly?” Zenjirou asked. The unexpected windfall was such that confusion and wariness were first to the fore. There was no joy in his reaction. In a certain light, that was the correct response.

“Of course. However, all that can currently be promised is a month. They cannot respond to anything outside of that, or to an emergency summons. The

latter would require someone to remain free for the entire period, and the healers of the Gilbelle Papacy are too high in demand.”

“I can understand that,” Zenjirou replied after letting out a breath.

The most dangerous period for both mother and child was undoubtedly the birth itself, but that didn’t mean the rest of the pregnancy was without issue. Ideally, Zenjirou would be able to fetch a healer if Aura’s condition suddenly changed. However, he had been pre-informed that would not happen.

The claim itself was understandable. Summoning a healer for an emergency was—to put it as poorly as possible—effectively queue-jumping. It went without saying that most of the Gilbelles’ patrons were the sick and infirm with no other hope of recovery. They were also all of a certain level of wealth and influence—royalty and nobility. Not waiting their turn would invite enmity that Capua did not need. Not only towards the country itself, but towards the Twin Kingdoms for allowing it.

“I, therefore, have a suggestion. If Her Majesty’s condition warrants it, you could employ a healer for half-yearly periods? It would naturally command quite the sum, but it should also keep any discord to a minimum.”

Using an emergency to interrupt the schedule as it stood would inevitably cause friction with those whose places were taken. In which case, a long-term contract keeping a single healer’s obligations focused on them would be fine. It would be a significant amount of money, but if they could manage it, that would be the best option.

Still, this was all too convenient.

“Is that possible?” Zenjirou asked, an expression of quizzical suspicion clear on his face.

The king smiled, deepening the wrinkles across his face as he nodded. “There is precedent, at the very least. However, if things progress to that extent, then all I can do is discuss it with Benedict. You will need to personally negotiate further.”

Benedict was the name of the current pope of the Gilbelle Papacy. The Twin Kingdoms was—as the name implied—a country with two royal families ruling

side by side. King Bruno III of the Sharou family and Pope Benedict I of the Gilbelle family were fundamentally the same rank.

The healers, being part of the Gilbelle family, naturally counted as Pope Benedict's subordinates. Even King Bruno could not arbitrarily command them.

"I see..." Zenjirou fell into thought. When he considered Aura's health, he wanted to get a healer on-site as quickly as possible. The problem was the balance of risk and reward.

King Bruno bringing it up won't be free. Plus, all he'll actually do is bring up the topic. After that, I'll need to convince the Gilbelles, led by Pope Benedict. If that takes too long, it'll be better to take the aid they've already promised around the birth.

If he had the healer for the most dangerous period and left the rest of the pregnancy to Doctor Michel, it would still be quite the amount of extra security. There was also the possibility that Zenjirou spending too long here while Aura was pregnant could be another source of stress and he'd end up damning himself regardless.

"However, I have my own plans. While I discussed the possibility myself, I have to admit I will simply not be able to introduce you to Benedict until a path for my abdication and Josep's ascension is in place."

"I see," Zenjirou repeated after a moment. He knew what the other man wanted to say and had to beat down the urge to sigh openly. Logic managed to win out over the impulse, and he kept any sign of it from his face. Still, though, the urge remained.

So that's how he's playing it. This sly old fox, he's making it so I need to help him with the succession problems if I want a healer for a longer period.

The king didn't want Zenjirou's active participation or aid. In short, Zenjirou was to effectively be a living talisman.

The nobility of the Twin Kingdoms would find it hard to shun their positions as "the king's subordinates" while they were in front of another country's royalty like Zenjirou. In turn, that meant that things would go at the pace Bruno set.

"If you wish it, I will do my utmost to manage the situation and see that you

may return as soon as possible with a healer in tow.”

The king’s addition could be translated as, “If you want a healer for a long period, you need to be around for some of the succession issues.”

“That will unavoidably lead to your stay being lengthened, but we shall accommodate you such that you do not feel restricted. You can ask your demands of Lucretia from the Broglie house. She will be able to authorize them.”

It seemed that the blonde girl mediating for Zenjirou was indeed the honeypot ordered by the king. Zenjirou gave a sigh purposefully loud enough to be heard before speaking.

“I thank you for your concern. However, I will be returning periodically to Capua as we initially agreed, so I do not believe I will feel excessively restricted.”

It was the strongest reminder he could give. This kind of situation was where the strength of Capua’s teleportation magic truly came into its own. Zenjirou could only cast it twice a day with his reserves. However, it allowed the journey between Capua and the Twin Kingdoms—which would take a month during the active season and was not practical in the other seasons—to be carried out in an instant.

The king stroked his white beard at Zenjirou’s answer. “Hm? Then can I assume that you will remain until we are in a position to accommodate you, Your Majesty?”

Zenjirou considered for a moment before agreeing. “You can. However, my wife Queen Aura’s health is my priority. My plans may therefore change depending on the situation in my homeland, so I cannot promise that I will be here until the very end.”

“That is sufficient. Although in that case, the healer will only be able to attend to you for a month around the birth.”

“Of course.”

There was now a verbal promise of the outline of how things would go. Zenjirou would remain in the Twin Kingdoms until the majority of the Sharou

family's succession issues were solved, doing his best to assist. Once Zenjirou's assistance had reached a certain threshold, Bruno would speak with Benedict about dispatching a healer.

In and of itself, it might have sounded like the calculus of things was rather unbalanced. However, if you considered the unconditional offer of a healer for a month around the birth as an advance payment, there was indeed profit to be had.

In truth, the firm promise of a month of a healer's time had fulfilled about ninety percent of Zenjirou's goals in the country. Thus, Zenjirou's response was clear.

"Very well. I do not know how much assistance I will be, nor can I guarantee that I will remain for the entirety of the affair, but I will do as much as I am able."

"Indeed. I look forward to working with you, Your Majesty." The king smiled in satisfaction.

Outside of general greetings, the crown prince had said nothing, but now that there was an agreement in place, he leaned forward. He still maintained good posture as he spoke, however.

"Then, Your Highness, if I may make a request? Though I apologize for how soon it is."

The prince had been visible the entire time, but Zenjirou had almost forgotten about him during the conversation, so it came as something of a surprise.

"You may," he replied, adjusting his position to face the prince more than the king.

First Prince Josep of the Sharou family. He was forty-nine years old and looked the part. His hair was a bright brown but peppered with gray. His eyes were a darker brown. They were slightly inclined to begin with, but coupled with his current smile, they made him look like an amiable gentleman. His features held many similarities to his father's, but not as many to his own son, Francesco. Francesco was blond and had green eyes, so that alone made a massive difference.

Both of them were seated on opposite sofas so Zenjirou couldn't quite judge his height accurately. Their eye lines were mostly level, though, so he was likely neither exceptionally tall nor short.

Altogether, he was the very image of a friendly, middle-aged gentleman. Of course, he was to be the next king, so he wouldn't just be a nice person. It went without saying that Zenjirou could not let his guard down.

The man held Zenjirou's gaze steadily as he began to speak. "If I may first confirm, you are aware of our country's structure, no?"

"I am. With that said, only on a base level. I believe both the Sharou and Gilbelle families led emigrants from the Northern Continent and then worked together with the indigenous tribes to form the country."

Josep nodded throughout Zenjirou's explanation.

"Quite so. You also know that the descendants of those desert tribes are currently the four dukes."

"I do."

Zenjirou knew that much. On the Southern Continent, those without lineal magic would never be viewed as a royal house. It didn't matter how much history they had or how many people followed their rule.

Therefore, historically, the newcomers in the form of the Sharou and Gilbelle families had become rulers, and the four tribe leaders who had accepted them became dukes underneath them.

"Due to the historical particulars, it is tradition that when a Sharou ascends to the throne, they give the four dukes a magic tool."

"That seems a likely course of events," Zenjirou agreed, accepting the prince's explanation.

It was easy to imagine the conflict that it must have taken before the Four Tribes accepted the Sharou and Gilbelle families as their rulers. It followed that one of the points of compromise they had settled on would be that the king from the Sharou family would give the gift of a magic tool when they ascended.

"The new king offers a magic tool to the four dukes. They accept it and give a

gift of their own in return. That is how the king is officially recognized, although they have no option of not accepting it and not offering their own gift, so it is nothing more than a formality in truth.”

The world was deep in the mire of politics. While there might only be the straight path of “accept the gift, give your own,” politicians were the type of creature who could do much with *how* they walked that path.

Accepting the gift immediately and giving an eye-watering gift of their own would display a heartfelt welcome to the new king. Conversely, they could keep up the pretense until just before it would become rude not to accept it and grant a gift that—while lavish—was just that little bit less so than the previous king’s, and that would show they didn’t want the ruler to change.

“I would like your assistance with that magic tool.”

“Would that be in the form of a jewel to use in it?” That was the only thing Zenjirou could think of that he could use to aid with making a magic tool. The marbles.

His wariness must have shown, as Josep smiled as if to dispel that concern as he spoke softly. “Not in the slightest. I want a consultation. If you would lend your wisdom to the selection of what the new king ought to offer as a gift.”

“Consultation, you say? I am not particularly adept at magic...” he admitted in confusion.

It was completely true. Lineal magic was what determined royalty on the Southern Continent, so many nobles and royals mastered their magic. Compared to them, Zenjirou had grown up in a world lacking magic until most of the way through his twenties. It was no surprise that his knowledge of magic didn’t amount to even a smattering.

“In which case, I shall show you the historical gifts from prior kings. I have several candidates and will include those as well.”

Zenjirou’s immediate instinct was to ask why the prince needed a consultation if he was already so close to a decision. He managed to just barely keep the question unspoken.

It’s the other way around. If he’s already almost decided, there must be a

reason to ask me. In other words, he doesn't need what comes from the consultation, but the consultation itself?

Once he'd followed the train of thought that far, the conclusion seemed obvious. It was simply the same reasoning as everything else so far. The change of kings was almost a surprise attack by Bruno and Josep. The longer it took, the stronger the opposition faction would grow. They therefore wanted to tie up the gifts for the four dukes as quickly as possible. Thus, Zenjirou's name would be helpful. "Magic tools chosen by both the Twin Kingdoms's crown prince and His Majesty Zenjirou of Capua," would be much harder to find fault with.

It's not like I didn't already know, but it feels like my own skills barely matter past my position as Aura's husband, he thought to himself with an internal self-deprecating smile.

Most of the people who had interacted with Zenjirou respected him as the queen's consort and wished him to use that position and influence to do things for them. He was personally aware that his skills were nothing in the face of the position he held as consort to the monarch of a large country. Self-deprecating grin or not, he wasn't unhappy about it. If anything, he was relieved to understand why the prince wanted a consultation that would actually be of no use to him.

"Very well. While I do not have so much wisdom that I can lend it away, I will do what I can."

"Good. I look forward to it, Your Majesty," Josep said with a bright smile. Then, he continued on like it was nothing. "I will inform the four dukes of that." His tone was smooth and easy, but what he was actually saying was rather harsh.

Zenjirou had private meetings planned with their representatives. Telling the dukes preemptively that Zenjirou would be consulting on their gift would make negotiations much harder. It was honestly a bother for him.

Still, it's easier with it all clear from the start, I guess.

Zenjirou had no chance of beating born royalty and nobility in terms of sounding them out. If his hand was shown from the start, it might be easier to work with in some ways. With his mood buoyed by that thought, he pasted a

smile on his face.

“Then perhaps I should ask them directly what they would like? Though if that would harm matters, I will of course refrain.”

“Not at all. If you wish to ask them, then I shall not deny you. That reminds me, each of the families have sent individual invitations. It would be rather rude to repeatedly have you as a visitor for the same things. We will provide a location here, so please meet them all at once.”

“Are you sure?” Zenjirou asked after a moment.

The middle-aged prince laughed at his shock. “I am. Things may be different if it was the dukes themselves. Their representatives in the capital are another matter, though, and meeting them all at once would not be an issue. It would be better to avoid wasting your precious time with individual meetings.”

“I see...”

While he agreed verbally with the prince, Zenjirou couldn't help but feel things were off slightly. *It feels like he's making light of the dukes. Or maybe alienating them? I haven't heard any rumors about discord between the Sharous and the dukes, so is this a personal thing?*

A glance at the king as he thought things through showed that the man was not going to gainsay his son, at least.

If King Bruno's not refuting it either, are things not good between them and the dukes? Or is it just their representatives? I might be imagining things, but the way he spoke about them felt a lot like how Lucretia did.

It was just as that passed through his head that Josep interrupted his train of thought. “Incidentally, Your Majesty, how has Lucretia from the Broglie family been? I am personally acquainted with the family, so I find myself curious.”

Since the question was almost as if in answer to his thoughts, Zenjirou found himself responding. “She seems like an attentive girl. Things are going well. However, the Broglie family must be rather important if you would ask after her personally.”

“Indeed. Lucretia's family name has been a distinguished one since our

founding. You could very well call them a pillar of our country. The previous Lady Broglie was wet nurse to my younger brother—the second prince, that is. The current Marquis Broglie is practically his foster brother.”

While somewhat taken aback by the sudden mention of the second prince, Zenjirou made an impressed expression as he nodded. “She belongs to quite a family, then. I was not aware it was to that extent. I must thank you for the consideration behind her aid, then.”

As he ducked his head to hide his expression, the prince waved a hand negligently.

“Not at all. We would always show such consideration to a quest of your stature, Your Majesty. Lucretia may be young, but she knows her place as a noble, so you may ask of her what you will.”

The phrasing may well have had some intimation of a honeypot in it. The Sharou family wanted his lineage. They would welcome and be the last to condemn them for becoming involved. Lucretia herself would be well aware of that too.

The king had also said that he should use Lucretia for any business he required. The blonde-haired girl by that name seemed to have been almost certainly sent in by the Sharou family. Her overly young appearance made it hard to say that this was the case with any certainty, though.

At any rate, he could see that Lucretia clearly had strong ties to the Sharou family, and why she and the prince both wanted him to slight the four dukes’ representatives.

There might be a deep-rooted antagonism between the two groups, Zenjirou thought to himself. “Very well. This is an unknown land to me, and I am glad that I can rely on Lady Lucretia,” he answered with a smile, even as his wariness ratcheted up.



Three days later, Zenjirou was in a room of the Purple Egg Palace and meeting with people who called themselves the four dukes’ representatives.

“It is an honor to meet you, Your Majesty. I am Shuura, first daughter of Duke

Elehalieucco,” said a beautiful girl with hair a similar shade to Aura’s but tied into a ponytail as she bowed. Her eyes were slightly slanted and she looked to be in her late teens. Back in Japan, he’d have called her a high schooler.

“I am Duke Reierfon’s third daughter, Nazeema. It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty,” said another beauty at the first’s side. She had gray hair with the slightest tinge of blue. Her eyes were the same shade and curved into a smile. She was about half a head shorter than the ponytailed girl but looked about the same age.

Standing next to the two was a beautiful woman, and she introduced herself as well. “I am here on behalf of Duke Elementaccato. My name is Talajeh and I am grateful for the chance to meet you.”

Elementaccato’s representative was the only one of the four who had a Western appearance. Her hair fell in soft waves of gold and her eyes were amber. Her skin was slightly darker, though, and it was hard to say that she looked completely Western. She was probably descended from both the natives and the emigrants. As far as her age went, she looked around twenty.

“I am Fiqriya from the Animeeum household. Thank you for making time for us today, Your Majesty.”

In contrast, the girl calling herself Fiqriya was wholly descended from the natives, judging by her appearance. Her hair, eyes, and skin were all dark. She seemed older than twenty, and while she was the shortest of the group, she was also seemingly the eldest. Her glossy black hair was cut short to the nape of her neck. It was almost a waste of its beauty. Her onyx eyes were large but had no real emotion present in them. It mitigated her charms somewhat, but in terms of her appearance, she was certainly beautiful.

The red-haired Shuura, gray-haired Nazeema, blonde Talajeh, and black-haired Fiqriya... All four were beautiful in their own right. Zenjirou was sharp enough that he understood the implication when they all arrived and he saw they were of marriageable age.

I get why Lucretia was dismissive now. It’s nothing incredibly deep; she just views them as rivals.

Realizing that, Zenjirou looked at Lucretia out of the corner of his eye. She still

had an innocent smile on her youthful face, but there was a certain stiffness to it that hadn't been present until now, and it didn't waver at all. It was the very picture of a forced smile, unnatural in the extreme.

Just as Lucretia Broglie seemed to be a honeypot from the Sharou family, these women were the same, but from the four dukes. Their goals were fundamentally opposed, so of course Lucretia and her backer Josep weren't fond of them.

With that said, whatever their goals were, Zenjirou had no obligation to follow them.

"I am Zenjirou, husband to Queen Aura I of the Kingdom of Capua. I greet you all."

He gestured for the four women to sit. Once they had gracefully seated themselves, he continued.

"I was quite surprised to discover that the four dukes of the Twin Kingdoms have such fair and young women as their representatives."

Zenjirou's professed shock rode over the top of an implication that he had not come here with any intention of building that kind of relationship. Young or not, though, representatives of the four dukes would not show any disturbance at that.

"I was also shocked," Shuura said, smiling coolly as her red ponytail shifted. "I am aware that I am not quite skilled enough to take my father's place, but I shall do my utmost to bring no shame upon the clan."

"Is that so? Then I shall do my best to ensure that the surprise of our meeting is considered a pleasant one," Nazeema said with a smile, her gray hair falling dead straight.

"I apologize for the surprise, Your Majesty. Duke Elementaccato wishes to form a good relationship with Capua, so I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to put it right," said Talajeh with a sweet smile hiding none of the flattery, her hair falling in golden waves around her shoulders.

"I was also deeply shocked when Duke Animeeum suggested I be his representative. However, it was an unmissable chance, so I gladly took on the

role. Your Majesty, would you be willing to tell us of your own country?”

Fiqriya’s hair was glossy enough that it formed rings of light as she tilted her head with a smile.

While each of their smiles sprang from differing emotions, Zenjirou had to admit that they were all charming expressions. Certainly more than the blatantly forced smile on the blonde girl at his side.

Maybe Lucretia’s not quite got the knack yet. Guess it’s not surprising given her age.

As the somewhat rude thought went through his head, Zenjirou started talking with the four. It started with innocent topics: the weather, things they liked, and their hobbies. Through the ensuing conversation, he classified them into two groups.

Well, strictly speaking, he’d done so as soon as they’d met. Now, though, it was based on more than just their appearance.

“Out of interest, I’ve noticed that Shuura and Nazeema are both wearing traditional clothing, but Talajeh and Fiqriya, you are both wearing clothes from the Northern Continent. Is that a case of personal preference?”

Shuura and Nazeema both had more tribal clothing while Talajeh and Fiqriya both had more Western dresses. His conversation had let him infer that it wasn’t just personal taste, but he kept a curious expression on his face as he asked the question.

The youngest—Shuura—was the first to react. “Well, I certainly do prefer it, but it also comes down to attitude. As the tribe leader’s daughter, I could never choose clothing I could not ride a dash drake while wearing.”

As she spoke, she puffed out her rather flat chest. While the tribal clothing had the decoration and accessories that clearly showed them as women, the bottom half of both Shuura and Nazeema’s outfits were more like pants. They certainly wouldn’t get in the way of riding a dash drake.

“The Elementaccato family have settled, so our clothing and lifestyle as a whole is like the royal family’s. Women use carriages to travel, so these dresses are the norm,” Talajeh said, her words running contrary to Shuura even as she

lifted her contrastingly well-endowed chest.

Shuura's brown almond eyes met Talajeh's rounder amber ones for a brief moment and Zenjirou could almost see sparks flying between them. The other two simply smiled ruefully. It seemed that Shuura and Talajeh's animosity towards each other was well-known.

"Oh, so despite being tied together as the four dukes and tribes, there is such a difference in the culture between them. That is rather interesting," Zenjirou said evenly while his thoughts ran in another direction.

Right, so the Elehalieucco and Reierfon families have kept the lifestyle they had before the country was founded. On the other hand, the Elementaccato and Animeeum families have accepted the royal families' influence and stopped their nomadic lifestyle to settle. There've got to be a bunch of customs that are different between them.

A forceful distinction would be that the Elehalieucco and Reierfon families were still proud of their self-reliant nomadic lifestyle. On the other hand, the Elementaccato and Animeeum families had clearly subordinated themselves to the royal family and abandoned the nomadic lifestyle on dash drake back.

The differences between them had grown clear over the centuries. The clearest difference was the native tribal wear and dresses, but there were others. Shuura and Nazeema had both referred to their families as tribes, while Talajeh and Fiqriya had referred to them with terms like ducal family, and so on. Neither form of address was wrong, but the former could be taken as a declaration of pride in their independence, while the latter showed an understanding of the importance of their position within the country of the Twin Kingdoms.

He started to parse through what he knew.

Right, so when the families arrived from the Northern Continent, there were two types of tribes living here from the start. The passage of time has made things more peaceful, but there's still some level of conflict. After all, the two families that are supposed to have been leading the migrants are both technically exactly on par but against each other in some ways that are hidden from view.

On the other hand, the tribes that lived here to begin with each had the tribe leader's family become one of the four dukes. The Elehalieucco and Reierfon families kept their distance from the royal family and lifestyle while the Elementaccato and Animeeum families grew closer to them. There was obviously some level of estrangement between the two pairs. There are visible signs of conflict between the legitimate heir to the throne and his younger brother now as well. The whole country's built on conflict.

He'd heard that the relationships between various influential groups were complicated and labyrinthine, but the Twin Kingdoms must have been the most knotted among all the countries on the Southern Continent by his estimation.

He was at least certain that if he stuck his nose in without being careful, he might well get burned. Once more, he vowed to do his best not to be associated with any camp. Rather than trying to keep up the small talk and build better relations, he would be served best by finishing their business as soon as he could.

"I believe you have heard from Crown Prince Josep that he will be consulting with me in regard to the magic tool gifted to your four families."

"I have indeed," Shuura answered, but her smile had now vanished to be replaced with an intent look. The other three were much the same. It went without saying that it would be a matter that would make all involved tense up.

"I am not particularly well-informed on either magic or the four dukes and their families. So while I understand the rudeness of my question, I decided to ask you all directly. What would the four dukes wish for from a magic tool?"

The women paused in thought, an air of tension in the room. While each of them may have had magic tools they desired, it was hard to judge whether that should be revealed to an outsider.

The silence continued as they gave each other warning looks. The first to speak was as on the earlier occasion, the girl with the red ponytail: Shuura from the Elehalieucco family.

"In that case, Your Majesty, I would like a flame fence."

It seemed that her personality was more than a match for her strong

appearance. Zenjirou himself had heard of a flame fence. It was one of the names on the list of magic tools that had been gifted to the dukes in the past. It did exactly as the name implied, encircling a defined area in a wall of flames. It was useful both for protecting the reared drakes from wild carnivores and for hunting and trapping wild drakes. As the Elehalieucco family hunted primarily on wide-open sands, it certainly seemed advantageous.

Now that Shuura had set the ball rolling, the other three voiced their own desires.

“I would like several sheets of dual burn parchment, to have as many forms of contact as possible between the capital and my own town as it moves,” Nazeema said. The Reierfon family maintained their nomadic lifestyle, so “her town” referred to the tribe’s tents under the duke.

Contact was difficult even for members of the tribe, as the town could move by different routes depending on what was appropriate at any given time based on watering holes, the amount of water available, and the availability of grazing land.

In that respect, several sheets of the parchment allowing them to directly ask where the town was was by no means excessive, however many sheets there were.

“I believe that we would most prefer a tool for water purification,” Fiqriya commented on behalf of the Animeeum family, her short hair swishing as she moved. “Much of our lands are desert, so water is the most valuable resource of all.”

This, too, was an easily understandable desire. The land the tribe had settled contained the only lake in the country. However, it was a lake of strong brine.

Naturally, the only creatures that could stand the salt concentration twice that of seawater were specially adapted aquatic drakes. The excess salt made it impossible to use for either drinking or agriculture. Fortunately, there was the ever-convenient presence of magic in this world.

If you could cast a spell to purify the water, you could turn it into fresh water suitable for humans and drake alike. You also gained salt as a byproduct. The magic tool would increase their capacity for freshwater even further.

Of course, the family already had several such tools through past negotiations with the Sharou family, but taking advantage of the situation to gain another would be safer.

Now that the three women had voiced their desires, all gazes inevitably turned to the final representative. As everyone stared at the blonde, she pushed her shoulders back and straightened up, speaking slowly with a sweet smile.

“Your Majesty, I would like a space isolation barrier.”

It was, to put it mildly, an awfully shocking statement. Perhaps as was to be expected, Shuura’s face had gone as red as her hair as she shouted at the woman.

“Talajeh?! Do you understand exactly what you are asking?!”

“Talajeh?” Nazeema asked, her gray eyes wide in shock.

“Talajeh, I can see your aim, but I believe that to be an excessive request,” Fiqriya chided her, her dark eyes narrowing.

The three of them were right. The magic tool that Talajeh wanted was—as the name made very clear—one that used space-time magic. Of course, the users of that were restricted to the Kingdom of Capua. In other words, she was asking that Zenjirou give his assistance in the magic tool’s creation.

Making a magic tool ordinarily took several months or even years. With his wife currently being pregnant, that was out of the question. Still, as he had personally asked for her thoughts, he was hesitant to completely refuse it.

“That would be rather difficult. However, I would like to know why you would want such an item.”

The barrier spell was one of only three spells that Zenjirou could currently use. It did as the name implied, cutting off the interior of the designated space from the exterior and protecting it with an awfully strong barrier. The barrier was as short-lived as it was strong, though, so it had no real purpose as a spell on its own.

However, if you made it into a magic tool, things were different. A longer-

lived barrier would be immensely useful.

The blonde's smile took on an even sweeter look as her voice grew slightly breathy. "For mining. It shames me to admit it, but we lose several miners to accidents each year in our territory. Mining is considered simple manual labor, but it is a skilled profession in its own right. We constantly seek to mitigate any losses to the best of our abilities."

It was a more respectable answer than he had expected.

"Would those mines be gold mines?" Zenjirou asked. It was more rhetorical than an actual question.

The woman's smile remained in place as she answered him. "Indeed."

The Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle was one of only two countries on the Southern Continent that minted gold coins. However, the gold mine was not owned by either the Sharou or Gilbelle families. It was under the control of the Elementaccato family that Talajeh belonged to.

The vein of gold their mines tapped into was a large one, showing no signs of depletion even after centuries. However, mining it for so long meant that the part currently in use would be *deep* underground.

It was also located in the midst of a vast desert, the worst place for such a mine. They could use earth magic to create walls and ceilings, but the ground itself was weak, so cave-ins were practically a daily occurrence.

Any noxious gasses or ground from sand to pebbles could be warded off by wind magic, but against a full cave-in, the spells would be futile. A barrier magic tool would shrug off the weight of the whole ceiling. It was completely enclosed, so the air would need purifying at fixed intervals, but it would be highly significant in terms of miner safety.

"I see. I can certainly understand the reasoning. However, I would say that would be impossible on this occasion," Zenjirou said, showing his understanding of the family's position but being clear in his refusal.

She had likely expected the response, as her smile didn't waver while she nodded. "I understand. Incidentally, though, Your Majesty, I have heard that Prince Francesco and Princess Bona are currently staying in your country. Are

you close with them?” she asked, shifting the topic slightly.

“I am unsure whether I would class it as ‘close,’ but I have a good relationship with both of Their Highnesses,” he replied honestly, not seeing her goal with the question.

She then leaned slightly forward. “Is that so? In which case, perhaps my family will commission one of them to create a magic tool for us while they stay there. I look forward to your assistance should that happen.”

That was when Zenjirou understood. *Right, it's not like this gift is the only way for them to get one. They can just buy one from the Sharou family like normal.*

There was not necessarily a requirement for Zenjirou to remain in the Twin Kingdoms for longer in that case. There were two enchanters currently within the capital of Capua in the forms of Francesco and Bona. Once Zenjirou returned, they could take their time and make it with him there.

Naturally, it would not be a gift and would therefore command a considerable sum. The Elementaccato family held a gold mine, though, so it would not be unattainable.

“I do understand the impossibility of it at present, though. In which case, I would hope for an earth-hardening tool.”

Perhaps expectedly, the initial request was to show their desire for it. Therefore, she withdrew it easily and offered her next idea.

I mean, it's obvious, but these girls aren't just a honeypot. They're all negotiators for their families first and foremost.

Intertwining their bloodline with his, and using that entanglement to get the lineal magic for themselves, if possible, might have been their main objective. However, that did not make it their only objective. Talajeh of the Elementaccato family certainly seemed to be angling more for direct negotiations between her own family and the Capuan royal family as she flaunted her voluptuous body.

That was close, Zenjirou thought to himself. I let my guard down since they're young and good-looking. They're still better negotiators than I am.

“Very well, I shall convey your opinions to Prince Josep. I will also personally

put what knowledge I have towards the matter's consideration as well," Zenjirou said to them all, bringing the topic to an end.

"Please do."

"We leave it to you, Your Majesty."

"I have no doubt that it will be for the best of all of us."

"If you are willing, I would like to meet at a future date to discuss things further, Your Majesty."

The four beauties graciously lowered their heads as they answered.



Once the meeting with the beautiful representatives was over, Zenjirou returned to the Purple Egg Palace's annex. He was surrounded by his guards and soldiers as he traveled between the two locations.

While it was effectively his house for the duration of his stay, it did not feel like *home*. Entering it brought none of the relief and relaxation that coming home after a long day did.

The blonde-haired girl at his side made that all the more evident. Lucretia Broglie. The mediator assigned to Zenjirou by the Sharous, and primarily a honeypot.

She was considered to have just become an adult, so by Zenjirou's reckoning she would probably be fifteen. However, she looked a good two or three years younger. Her adorable looks and small stature were certainly charming. However, they were charming in a way that made you want to protect her, not in any way that would help a honeypot or for her to be seen as a woman.

That was why Zenjirou couldn't see her as a real danger, nor could he simply keep his distance.

"Good work, Your Majesty."

"Likewise, Lucretia. Sit down and we can have some tea," he said, gesturing to the sofa opposite.

"Thank you for the offer," she replied, following the gesture.

“Ines, for two.”

“Yes, sir.”

Once the nicely brewed tea was placed in front of both of them, Zenjirou began to speak.

“The representatives certainly were a surprise. Are you friendly with any of them?”

Still holding her porcelain teacup, Lucretia inclined her head before answering. “I am. We all have at least a certain level of familiarity due to social events. However, Lady Shuura and Lady Nazeema spent much of their time in their own towns so I have almost never met them before.”

The Elehalieucco and Reierfon families that Shuura and Nazeema belonged to respectively still continued their traditional nomadic lifestyles. Living in those “towns” meant that their day-to-day life was spent riding dash drakes through the sand.

“Impressive. Considering I cannot even ride a dash drake myself, I can only respect that.”

While his tone was joking, he really felt that way. He had a slight aspiration to ride a beast right out of fantasy like the dash drakes as if they were horses. Simply imagining not just one or two people but hundreds or thousands of them simultaneously on drakeback as they rode through the sand made his heart rate pick up. So much so that if it hadn’t been for his wife’s pregnant state, he might have asked to join one of those towns for a period.

“I suppose in that case you must not know too much about them.” he shrugged regretfully.

Lucretia’s big blue eyes shifted as she hurriedly started talking as if in sudden realization. “Even without directly interacting, they are famous in their own right, so I am not entirely unacquainted with them.”

“Oh?”

The brief question and look from him let Lucretia know he wanted to hear more. She briskly kept on talking.

“Lady Shuura is the eldest daughter of the current Duke Elehalieucco and his wife. I have heard that she is a proud individual. She feels more strongly about the Elehalieucco lineage and history from when the four dukes were still the Four Tribes. She holds herself to a standard such that she does not disgrace either of them.”

“I see. I certainly got that impression,” he agreed, though internally something felt off. If she felt so strongly about the four dukes’—or Four Tribes’—history, shouldn’t she be reluctant to tie herself to another country’s royalty?

Even as that doubt made itself at home in Zenjirou’s mind, Lucretia continued her explanation.

“Lady Nazeema is the third daughter of Duke Reierfon. She was born to his second wife and is—from what I have heard—a pleasant and sociable person. She is also oddly fond of drakes for a young girl and takes the initiative in the dash drakes’ care. So much so that she has been known to spend her nights with them when the eggs are close to hatching.”

“Oh, the dash drakes?”

That was also interesting information but made him feel like there was something off as well. Dash drakes were livestock in the truest sense of the word. Caring for them would never be considered a glamorous job. Even the idea of a duke’s daughter spending a night with livestock would be taken as a scandal.

“Lady Talajeh is Duke Elementaccato’s niece. Her mother is a noble descended from the Northern Continent’s refugees, so she looks the most similar to us. She is very progressive for nobility and is willing to speak with all kinds of people, such as merchants, to benefit her family.”

“That is indeed rare for a woman.”

At this point, Zenjirou’s slight sense of something being off had grown into near-certainty. In his estimation, being willing to personally engage with merchants for your family’s and land’s benefit was a real virtue. However, by the values of the Southern Continent as a whole, it was not particularly encouraged.

She's probably not lying, but is she purposefully focusing on the negatives?

His belief became utterly certain with her next statement.

“Finally, Lady Fiqriya is from a branch of the Animeeum family. She was adopted by the duke. She was apparently famous in her youth for her intelligence and curiosity and is the most well-known of the four. She knows an astonishing variety of magic and focuses on water magic specifically. She has, it seems, also created several original spells. In terms of her lineage, though, her descent from a close branch family means she has little mana for someone of the duke's line. The small mana pool she has means that while she knows strong spells, she cannot cast them.”

A small mana pool was a huge negative for a royal concubine. This was particularly true for someone like Zenjirou, as it was hard to call him particularly endowed in that respect for a royal. If his partner's capacity was too low, any children they had would be unlikely to inherit the lineal magic of his line.

Yup, it's definitely on purpose. She's trying to make sure I don't have any interest in the four of them.

In Lucretia's position, it was perhaps to be expected. He could consider it as firm evidence that she was truly there to tempt him. He couldn't prevent a rueful smile, though. He didn't intend to gain any concubines. The Uppasalan breaching of his defenses had required surrender, but it was an exception. He wasn't going to take a concubine because a woman was charming or alluring.

Those faults don't feel much like faults to me, though. If anything, the biggest "fault" in this conversation is Lucretia being so happy to disclose the others' downsides.

It had no real bearing because of Zenjirou's lack of desire in that vein, but he still wondered how Lucretia would react to finding out that she had harmed her own chances the most.

“I see. That will be useful to know. My thanks, Lucretia,” he said nonchalantly with that somewhat mean thought still in his mind.

“Not at all, Your Majesty,” she said, bowing and making her side-tail bounce.

Zenjirou raised his hand slightly in acknowledgment before he continued.

“Incidentally, I was able to hear what they would desire in their positions but I wish to ask you the same question. What would you see as appropriate gifts for the four dukes?” he asked, moving the topic on without actually changing the thrust of the discussion.

Her blue eyes widened and she thought for a moment before answering quietly. “Well, I am closer to the Sharou family and therefore have their interests more in mind with my answer. I would say that an unwavering fireball for illumination would be the most suitable.”

It was exactly as the name implied, a spell that created a globe of fire that maintained its shape. The amount of extra mana that was required versus a spell that created ordinary fire to just make it static meant that it saw little general use. However, while it was of little use as a short-lived spell, things were different if it were to be made into a magic tool and was usable for longer periods.

A steady light source was less fatiguing for the eyes, and the spherical shape made the light more even. Naturally, it was still fire even if it was in an unnatural shape, so it could also be used as a fire lighter. It therefore made a useful gift to whoever it was given to.

Due to how many such tools had been made over the years, there were plenty of enchanters who knew the spell, and several could be fashioned in a relatively short period. He could certainly see its value with respect to the king and crown prince’s desire to get the succession completed in short order.

Yup, she’s definitely on their side of things, he thought, speaking at the same time. “That was indeed helpful. My thanks.”

“Not at all, Your Majesty,” Lucretia repeated with another wide smile and bow of her head.

Intermission — A Strategy Meeting

That night, Lucretia Broglie, the mediator for the guest of honor from Capua—Zenjirou Capua—shucked her oversized dress and feigned innocence as she returned to her own room.

“Argh, I’m so mad! So! Mad! They made it obvious. They’re serious. Well, they’re not having him! He’s mine! They can’t have him!” she yelled as she stomped her tiny foot and balled up her fists. She was clad only in a luxurious silk slip.

“Lady Lucy, His Majesty is no one’s. At most you could say that he is Queen Aura’s, but he is certainly not yours,” her confidante, Flora, said sharply.

“I know. I just wanted to say it!” she replied while tugging the ribbon from her hair and diving into the bed. “Ugh. Why, why, *why* won’t this go well?”

She kicked her legs as she buried her face in the pillow, slapping at the bedding.

“Acting like that makes you a real unreasonable child, Lady Lucy,” Flora pointed out with half-lidded eyes.



The blonde grabbed the pillow with both hands and hid her face behind it, peeking out at the maid with her blue eyes.

“Is it not cuter than that?”

“A person may feel that way if they have reached the point where a child is cuter the more difficult they are to handle, perhaps.”

“Tch...”

Lucretia put on a sulky look at the maid’s merciless answer before shifting upright and crossing her legs. The lack of any other outerwear than her slip made her underwear visible, but she was honestly too young for it to look alluring. Frankly, it just made her look all the more like an impolite child.

It was the same way she always acted, so Flora only let out a purposely audible sigh and said nothing more.

“Cease the silliness. Since you undid your hair, I will brush it if you come over here.”

The girl slid back to sit in front of the maid on the edge of the bed.

“That works fine. I will get the brush.”

“Mmm...” Lucretia said as the brushing started. She half closed her eyes like a cat at the comfortable sensation of her confidante running the brush through her hair. “Say...Flora?”

“What is it, Lady Lucy?”

“Tell me honestly, what did it seem like His Majesty thought of the four?”

“The four,” of course, referred to Shuura, Nazeema, Talajeh, and Fiqriya—the representatives of the four dukes.

The maid didn’t stop brushing her mistress’s hair as she answered the question put to her. “Well. This is my own estimation, but I do believe that he had no interest in them at all.”

“Hah! I was right!” Lucretia exclaimed with a sunny smile.

“I would also add, if I may, that he feels the same towards you.”

“Of course he does...” She gave a self-deprecating laugh.

Flora kept running her one hand through the blonde locks of her disappointed liege, lifting the hair and pulling the brush through it.

“I don’t understand, though,” Lucretia continued. “I can see why he would not have an interest in me. Why would he feel nothing for those four, though?”

Lucretia was aware that she had no womanly charms in the way most would see it. For better or worse, however, she hadn’t expected him not to show any interest in the others. As much as it vexed her, she had to admit the four women were certainly charming.

Shuura was strong-willed and had a cool beauty to her. Nazeema might be slightly plain but she had the air of an obedient lady. Talajeh had amazing looks and a figure to match. Fiqriya might not show much emotion, but her obsidian eyes were alight with intelligence.

Each of the beauties had their own charms leveled his way. Including Lucretia, five charming women had an interest in him, but he showed no interest in any of them. That was far beyond their expectations.

“Maybe he has no interest in women?” Lucretia suggested, voicing the worst case.

Flora immediately refuted her. “I believe we can discount that. His Majesty has already fathered a child with Queen Aura and she is currently pregnant with their second. While a woman interested in other women can be forced into pregnancy by a man, the converse is far more difficult.”

“If it’s difficult, that means it’s not impossible, is it?”

“It certainly is *possible*. The potential for children is a matter of life or death for royalty and nobility and yet there are always some born either impotent or homosexual.”

The blonde gulped and leaned forward. “S-So how might they...”

“I do not know about other countries, but here we have both the enchanters of the Sharou family and healers of the Gilbelle family. The two families have developed magic tools so that men and women may...” She then realized she

was straying from the topic and cleared her throat and dragged the conversation back on track. “Well, I believe that we can assume that His Majesty can indeed love a woman.”

Lucretia was in thought, however. “Impotent...magic tools for... Oh! Those magic tools are why our royals have children for longer than other count—Mgh?!”

Her face had been shifting into an even deeper smile as she felt towards a dangerous truth before Flora covered her mouth from behind.

“Going any further would be inappropriate for a lady.” Once she saw her charge nod, Flora recommenced her brushing as if nothing had happened.

“Then why is he so indifferent? I admit he does not seem to be the type to grasp for power.”

There were many among the royal and titled nobility who dispensed with romance or sexual attraction to focus on gaining power and status for their families. Those people put an emphasis on the woman’s status and prestige, thinking nothing of how attractive or not they were.

If Zenjirou was one of those ambitious people, then she could understand why he would be so unmoved no matter how beautiful they were. Lucretia could not see him as that kind of man, though.

Flora felt the same. “I think so too. He lacks the gleam that characterizes nobility taken with power. Of course, those with sufficient self-control can hide the signs, so I cannot say for certain.”

“The only other thing that comes to mind would be that he feels little lust to begin with? You hear about them from time to time, no? They lose their drive while they are young or as they mature?”

“I can see elements of that in His Majesty. However, those with little appetite often have little initiative to begin with. What I have heard from the soldiers paints the picture of him being rather proactive within Capua. We should consider him as such while he is in our lands, at least.”

“You’re right,” the blonde agreed, chewing at her lower lip in thought. “If he is proactive despite having little lust, perhaps that isn’t his true nature?”

“In that case, it would be Queen Aura pushing him into such a lifestyle outside of his preference, but that contradicts the rumors. I have heard that the relationship between the two is as harmonious as can be. If she were forcing him into a lifestyle he disliked, they would not be so affectionate.”

“Then their relationship’s status could just be propaganda from Queen Aura, and he is actually henpecked and suffocated by her?” she asked as she turned around with shining eyes.

Flora gently turned her head back to her front and chided her verbally.

“I cannot say that is impossible. However, that passes prediction and estimation and becomes fanciful. You should not assume the variables are as you would prefer or you may well get burned.”

“Ugh...”

She seemed to understand the selfishness in her comment because she fell silent. Once she’d recovered, she muttered seriously to herself. “Though with my impressions so far, there must be some falsehood contained within the information we have.”

“Indeed,” the maid agreed. “If the information and impressions we have are all correct, then His Majesty shows no interest in any of multiple beautiful women yet is not homosexual or impotent. Has little personal ambition but actively pursues his duties as royalty and has a good relationship with his wife in all respects.”

“It’s all conflicting! No one like that exists!” Lucretia exclaimed, throwing her hands up at the list of conditions Zenjirou would have to fulfill. “No ambition but takes the initiative with his duties? Not interested in other beauties but taken just with his wife? That’s just impossible. Or is she just that beautiful? Enough that he wouldn’t consider other women and happily carry out his orders without really wanting to?”

“Indeed. I have heard that she is an amazing woman, and beautiful as well, but...”

The maid’s expression was conflicted. It was no surprise; there was a large difference between an amazing woman—or Amazonian, as she may be called

on Earth—and amazing beauty. Having finished brushing Lucretia’s hair while they spoke, she stepped away.

“You may move again, Lady Lucy.”

“Mm, thanks, Flora.”

Now with shining, silky hair, Lucretia turned around on the bed to face her maid. Even sitting on the edge of the bed, her feet didn’t reach the floor. Swinging her legs was far from the behavior of a noblewoman, but it was much better than having her legs crossed as she had done before.

She continued the earlier conversation in her new position. “I feel like I’m trying to deal with an illusion that doesn’t really exist. I have made passes over the past few days, but he hasn’t reacted at all.”

She had done exactly that, making passes just on the right side of acceptability for her station. She stood so close that another half step would have seen her rebuked for shamelessness, and she never missed an opportunity to praise him. She made the benefits of marrying her for both Zenjirou and the royal family as a whole as blatant as was seemly. Her expression and the way she presented herself were constantly intended to make her as charming as possible while she was around him.

And yet those words all slipped off without even a flinch from his smile. The maid inclined her head at Lucretia’s statement before offering her own opinion.

“Viewing things externally, it seems more as if you are attacking in the wrong place rather than attacking an illusion. How to put it? It is as if you are attacking your enemy’s shadow with full strength.”

“How’s that any different than attacking an illusion?” she asked with a frown.

Flora raised her index finger as she explained. “It is very different. If you were attacking an illusion, then there would be no way at all for your attacks to connect. However, if it is simply a case of a mistaken target, then the real target must exist. If you can find that vital point, you will certainly be able to take him down.”

“I see. So it is not that His Majesty is completely insurmountable but that my approaches have been wrong so far?” the girl asked, leaning forward.

“Indeed. Though that does not mean that you will necessarily be *able* to make a correct approach,” Flora replied, raining on her parade somewhat.

The slight shower could not fully dampen the flames of her ambition, though.

“Great! It’s a battle of attrition, then! I’ll try all the ways I can without being rude, and once I know what works best, I’ll go full strength!” she exclaimed, stretching her tiny fists towards the ceiling.

“Kindly refrain from causing the Broglie household issues,” Flora replied with a resigned sigh after a moment.

Chapter 3 — Coming Home and Going Home

It had been ten days since Zenjirou's meeting with the representatives of the four dukes.

"Sir Zenjirou, it is almost time. Please get changed," Ines requested, nearby in her position as his maid.

"Oh, already? Got it."

He had been relaxing in his loungewear since getting up, but now he followed the request and started to pull on the third uniform.

This was a royal palace, so any time he set foot outside of his private rooms, Zenjirou wore the third uniform. He'd found it rather stifling at first but he was relatively used to it now.

As he changed with the younger maid's assistance, he checked the plans for the day. "No meetings today, right?"

There was a note of joy in his voice after practically ten full days of dealing with people wishing to meet him. It was quite possible he was tired of having the same conversations with a different person each day and night.

"Indeed. Today is when you will be sending General Pujol back to Capua, so the day is taken up with the changeover and travel."

The plan was unchanged from the original: General Pujol would be handing over command of Zenjirou's guard force to a young commander and returning to Capua today. Naturally, his return would take the form of Zenjirou's teleportation spell.

He gave a short word of thanks to the maids who had helped him change before sighing. "We've generally finished dealing with the people who wanted audiences as of yesterday, right?"

The middle-aged maid nodded. "I believe so, yes. There are, of course, ten times more people who wish to meet with you, but the urgent obligatory

meetings have mostly been dealt with. We will, however, need to reschedule the meeting with Prince Largo after his sudden cancellation the day before yesterday.”

“Oh, right.” Zenjirou frowned as her statement brought it back to mind. “I’m not sure how I feel about putting it this way, but what could be so important he’d cancel a meeting with another royal like me?”

“From the rumors I have heard, he received a direct order from King Bruno.”

“Man, that’s even more blatant than I expected.” His face twisted at what he inferred from that.

Publicly, at least, the only person who knew the time and date of a meeting would be the one who had sent the invitation. Therefore, an order from the king clashing with the scheduled meeting was “a mere coincidence.”

There was no way that it was indeed a coincidence, though. The king had clearly determined the date and given the prince busywork of some variety to interfere with it. That was precisely why Zenjirou was so bewildered.

“Why would he be so obvious about it? Unless he thinks that Prince Largo would be able to convince me?” Zenjirou pondered, thinking it through logically and coming to that conclusion. “So the prince can offer some benefit that would make me jump ship?”

“Perhaps?” Ines replied calmly as Zenjirou pitched slightly forward. “Considering both of their positions, I believe King Bruno could offer any benefit that Prince Largo could. Personally, I fear it is the converse.”

“The converse?”

“Yes. Prince Largo will not tell you of benefits, but of disadvantages. Disadvantages that your dealings with the king have not made clear. If he revealed them, would it not pull you away from the opposing faction?”

“That...seems plausible.”

It was an unpleasant prospect, but a logical one. It was not something he could ignore.

“Our current course remains to support King Bruno and Prince Josep, but I

would like to hear what Prince Largo has to say as soon as possible. Prioritize his next request as much as you can when it arrives.”

“I understand,” she replied with a deferential nod.



Several hours later, Zenjirou was in another room of the annex, witnessing the handover from a ceremonially dressed General Pujol to the young commander at his side.

“I wish you well, Sir Zenjirou. I will henceforth be entrusting my duties here to this man,” he said before turning to the soldier in question. “Introduce yourself.”

The young commander took a step forward. “Sir! I am Eladio, commander of the third battalion of the Drake Marksmen Knights. I will undertake General Pujol’s role after today!”

“I see. I foresee no issues with your abilities if General Pujol vouches for you. I look forward to working with you, Eladio.”

As he spoke, Zenjirou surveyed the man. He looked a few years past twenty, similar in height to the general, being perhaps a finger or two’s width shorter. He was nowhere near as broad, however, so he looked somewhat lanky. That was only due to being alongside the general, though, and he had more than enough muscle for his position.

“Yes, sir!”

The young commander—Eladio—wore a confident expression. With both that and his behavior, the man seemed very sure of himself.

Being a battalion commander in the Drake Marksmen Knights despite his youth certainly supported the confidence. Then again, there was an element of danger inherent in a young up-and-coming influential person, which was more apparent to an influential person who was currently in their prime.

“Eladio, I recognize skill both on the battlefield and in command. However, the duty you have been entrusted with now is different from that which you have been granted thus far. You are responsible for the protection of an

honored part of our country. Know that failure is not an option.”

His direct superior’s warning was heavy for him, so the man’s expression tightened slightly.

“I understand, sir. The knights aside, I would prefer to strengthen our soldiers to make doubly certain. I will fill any such deficits, however.”

Pujol’s eyes narrowed as the man voiced clear dissatisfaction with the men they had brought. His lips bent into a vicious grin.

“This is a good learning opportunity for you, Eladio. You seem to be laboring under a misapprehension, so I shall correct it. There is no such thing as an incapable soldier in this world. Remember this well.”

“Truly, sir?” the commander replied.

His face was clearly in disagreement.

The general took no notice of that disagreement, though. “Indeed. There are the rare soldiers who are detrimental to the cause, but none incapable. After all, their position is permitted based on their capabilities. Those you think of as incapable are average. A commander capable of leading such men as a group is considered an average commander. The skill to do so is required to even attain the position. Valuations of capability fall upon that person.”

The commander was silent. He likely understood the thrust of the general’s statement, as his confident expression vanished to be replaced with his lips falling into a hard line.

“If a force cannot carry out its duties, it is not made up of many incapable soldiers and a single average commander. Instead, it has many average soldiers and a single incapable commander. Now, Battalion Commander Eladio, can your men carry out their duties as they should?”

“Of course!”

“I expect no less.” The general grinned in challenge as the younger man glared at him, protesting the implied slight to his capability.

Now that the handover was finished, his return was all that remained. Therefore the two of them were walking alongside each other to the one room

where teleportation was permitted.

Only Ines and Natalio followed them. Zenjirou was still inexperienced, so the minimal escort was to remove much of the attention on him and increase the probability that he could cast the spell. While there was a slight antagonism between them as Aura's husband and a prior candidate for her hand, the past twenty days as protector and protectee allowed Zenjirou and Pujol to speak more familiarly.

"Your statement from earlier was rather harsh. Did he provoke you that much?"

The general lifted his broad shoulders in a slight shrug. "It was nothing so deep. I was simply repeating what my own commanding officer once told me."

A man with confidence bordering on arrogance, blessed with the qualities to justify it. Perhaps the general could see his younger self in Eladio.

"I see. Your previous commander had a rather severe way of speaking, then."

"I would perhaps call him strangely perfectionist rather than harsh. He said that to us commanders while going and telling the soldiers, 'You have no right to choose your commanders. Therefore, you must have sufficient skill that you can at least survive under an incapable commander.'"

A rueful smile made its way onto his face at the memories. Zenjirou laughed.

"If he made even the great General Pujol look like that, he must have been quite the taskmaster. I would not have lasted a day."

"Pardon me, sir, but you would likely not have been able to join to begin with. You would probably have been rejected during the initial screening."

"I suppose you are right."

With the world requiring military prowess of its male nobility, the statement was rather rude. However, Zenjirou wasn't going to let people pointing out the truth bother him after this long.

They arrived at the room during a surprisingly pleasant conversation. This was the room Zenjirou had initially been sent to. It was the one room where teleportation was permitted in the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle.

With Ines locking the door behind them and Natalio standing guard just in case, Zenjirou turned back to the general.

“I will be sending you to the capital via teleportation. Are you ready?”

“I am. You can commence at your leisure.”

The man was currently clad in leather armor with a big bag hanging from his shoulder. The journey would be via magic and so required no real preparations for travel.

The only other thing that drew the eye was the bundle of drake parchment in his hand. Zenjirou pulled out more of it to add to the bundle.

“This is a letter to Queen Aura from me. Ensure that it reaches her.”

Zenjirou’s writing was still somewhat limited, so it was nothing extravagant. It was also nothing that would cause issues if it were intercepted.

“I shall see it delivered,” Pujol answered as he politely took the sheet and placed it atop the rest.

The bundle of parchment comprised letters from the knights and soldiers here. They had entrusted letters for their families to the general as he returned. It implied that he perhaps supported his subordinates more than his appearance might suggest.

Either way, there was no more reason to delay.

“I shall send you on now, then. I may not succeed on my first attempt, so be prepared for this to take some time,” Zenjirou said as he placed his right hand on the general’s abdomen and let his gaze drop to the sheet of paper in his left.

The paper held a printout of the stone room in Capua’s royal palace.

“Send all things in the space that I envision to the place that I desire. As compensation, I offer—”

As he chanted the spell, Zenjirou closed his eyes to make the visualization as clear as possible. He envisaged General Pujol standing alone in the center of the stone room.

The spell activated.

Zenjirou opened his eyes at the sudden lack of contact with his hand. The massive form of the general was no longer in front of him.

“So I managed to send someone else on my first try. Maybe I’m getting used to it?”

He flexed his right hand several times as if to savor the accomplishment of his increased skill. Ines spoke softly to him.

“Good work, Sir Zenjirou. Do you not wish to take a photo?”

“Oh, right. I almost forgot again. Thanks, Ines.”

He hurriedly pulled the camera from his pocket and took photos of his surroundings.

“All good,” he said after checking them, turning the camera off immediately.

He could only charge electrical appliances in the inner palace, so he couldn’t waste any of the charge he had.

“We’ve done everything we need to now. Let’s head back,” Zenjirou said, prompting responses from both Ines and Natalio.

“Understood, sir.”

“Yes, sir.”



It was the afternoon of the day General Pujol had been sent back to the capital as had been planned. Zenjirou, however, had just received news he had not expected in the slightest.

“What? Who has arrived?” he asked.

The side-tailed girl bearing the report—Lucretia—could not hide her bewildered expression either as she repeated herself.

“Prince Francesco has requested an audience with you. Would you be willing to see him?”

Prince Francesco, the grandson of King Bruno III of the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle, son of the Crown Prince Josep.

That information alone made it seem perfectly natural that he would be in the Purple Egg Palace. Reality was rarely so simple, though. Prince Francesco, along with his supervision in the form of Princess Bona, should currently have been in Capua. For Prince Francesco to be within the Twin Kingdoms, Aura had undoubtedly used teleportation to send him there.

It was still inconceivable, though. There were usually official procedures that were an indispensable part of a royal leaving a country and returning to their own nation. Naturally, those procedures would take place within the Purple Egg Palace and so Zenjirou would have heard about it due to currently residing there.

For the prince's arrival to come as such a bolt from the blue meant that his return was not yet official. And to immediately request an audience with a foreign royal like Zenjirou while not officially in the country was, to put it mildly, unconventional.

With that said, Zenjirou was not in a position to bluntly refuse.

"Very well. Inquire as to a convenient time. I shall prioritize him as much as I am able," he told her, barely holding in a sigh.

Lucretia then shook her head, hair bobbing with the motion, and answered with a harried expression.

"That was not quite what I meant... Prince Francesco is waiting outside of the door."

Finally, Zenjirou could no longer hold in his sigh and let it blow gustily from his lips. It would normally be considered a breach of etiquette, but no one would blame him for it on this occasion. The norms had already been well and truly discarded by Francesco, so an ordinarily unacceptable sigh would naturally be overlooked. In fact, being somewhat affiliated with the Sharou family, Lucretia had hunched in on herself in apology. It made her already small frame appear even smaller.

"We can hardly make the king's grandson wait out in a corridor. Ines."

"Yes?" the maid replied.

"You know the situation. I would like to see the prince immediately. Is there a

room ready?"

"There is. This way," she answered with a placid expression.

When Prince Francesco entered the room after their arrival, his immediate greeting was a carefree laugh.

"It's been a while, Your Majesty. A month of no meetings counts as a while, right? Either way, it certainly feels strange to be meeting you in the Purple Egg Palace!"

He had long hair for a man, with clear blue eyes. His smile managed to capture the elegance of his position and features along with the frivolity of his character.

"You appear to be the same as always, Prince Francesco. Please, sit."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. Ah, this is a souvenir."

As he spoke, Francesco placed a sealed letter and a bundle that fit roughly in the palm of his hand on the table.

"And this is?" Zenjirou asked. He recognized the seal on the letter. It was the royal family of Capua's sealing wax, and the seal itself was one permitted only to the reigning monarch.

"From Queen Aura?"

"Indeed, it is her reply."

Since it was specifically a reply, that meant that it would be a response to the letter he had sent this morning. It was a hearteningly quick reply. It was likely no coincidence that Prince Francesco had returned on the same day that General Pujol had made the trip in the other direction. Aura must have planned it to be able to hold a conversation like this.

Still, it would be inappropriate for him to open it here.

"My thanks for personally bringing this."

Zenjirou signaled Ines as he spoke, and she stepped forward and deftly took both the letter and bundle before falling back. He was curious to know what his beloved wife had to say but temporarily put it out of his mind.

“Was this rushed meeting to deliver the missive, then?” Zenjirou asked.

There was a clear note of criticism in his words. Still, Francesco’s smile didn’t dim in the slightest.

“I wouldn’t travel so far just to hand over a letter. The reason I so rapidly sought an audience with you was due to the shocking information I received. While I was astonished to hear about grandfather abdicating and officially handing the throne to my father, I was even more shocked to hear that your aid had been requested with the selection of gifts for the four dukes. When I heard that, I thought, ‘I have to see him as soon as possible!’ So here I am!” he said with a laugh.

Zenjirou couldn’t help slumping at that. He remembered now: the man was a real artifice nut, and a magic tool nut specifically. No longer feeling any need to conceal it, he let out another sigh.

Francesco placed his right hand on the table and leaned forward. “Please, tell me what the current candidates are. Do you have ideas of your own? The final decision hasn’t been made yet, has it?!”

“In other words, you want to be involved in the selection of the magic tools, don’t you?”

The question was half-rhetorical, but the answer was far from what Zenjirou was almost certain it would be. Francesco looked almost flustered as he shook his head.

“Not at all. I *do* think of myself as one of the foremost enchanters. If I come on too strong and have the open-ended assignment, though, I know that I will run away with it. I will therefore offer *no* opinion on this.”

“Oh? I see.”

There was a swelling sense of unease in Zenjirou’s chest at the prince’s uncharacteristic words. He could certainly see Francesco offering a ridiculous magic tool if asked for his opinion.

Was this really Francesco, though? He had assessed himself so frankly and actively chosen to not inconvenience others. Purposefully pulling back and stressing that he would offer no opinion at all meant there must be more to it

than it seemed.

Zenjirou's expression sharpened so that he would miss nothing while the prince's face and voice remained unchanged. Despite the way he spoke not changing in the slightest, *what* he was saying could not be more different from the norm.

"In fact, I would say that my Uncle Largo would be the person to ask in this instance. He is a conservative person, so I believe he would be particularly aligned with you."

There was a silent pause.

"Oh?"

There was certainly more to the matter than Zenjirou yet knew. Francesco's advice all but cemented it. Zenjirou purposefully lowered his voice to a murmur.

"More so than His Majesty or Crown Prince Josep?"

"In this case, yes," the prince answered immediately. There was no hesitation to his answer despite Zenjirou probing rather deeply.

Zenjirou considered things. He couldn't forget that this was merely Francesco's personal opinion. Yet that opinion was that Zenjirou and Prince Largo had more aligned interests than the former did with either of the other two royals. Coming from Francesco made it feel rather unreliable, but that did not mean he could ignore it.

Zenjirou remained with his eyes closed as he thought things over for a period. Eventually, he made a decision and opened his eyes.

"I understand. Since the endorsement comes from you, I shall make an effort to see Prince Largo as soon as possible and hear what he has to say."

The blond's face broke out into a wider smile.

"That would be for the best, I believe. It should be an enlightening discussion. I would like to attend if that would be acceptable. Though the next two days won't work."

"The next two days?"

“Indeed. My official welcome home will be tomorrow, and the day after will be an informal welcome meal with my family. The latter, though, will also be an opportunity for the lecture of a lifetime. I’d love to get out of it, but both father and grandfather are the type to have their lectures go on for longer the more you make them wait. Facing the anger head-on makes the cuts shallower,” he said with a chuckle, scratching his head.

Zenjirou’s eyes narrowed at the blatant sharing of information. “You said that the informal meeting would involve your family? Would that also include Prince Largo?”

“No, it is direct relations only. Me, my parents, my grandparents, and my siblings are all who would be present.”

His uncle, half-siblings, and any concubines of the participants would naturally not fall into that category, so it would be very direct relations only. In other words, Prince Largo would not be called away the day after tomorrow. The king and crown prince, despite obstructing the meeting, would not be present to do so as they would be busy lecturing Francesco.

“I see. My thanks for the valuable information. I shall use it to make my plans for the coming days,” Zenjirou said while clearing his throat. He was, however, somewhat taken aback by how well the prince expressed himself without words.

“I am honored it was of use,” Francesco replied with his usual carefree smile.

That night, Zenjirou changed into his favorite pajamas and cast his eyes over the letter from his beloved wife under the light of the magic tool.

“Huh, I’d decided to ask Ines to read it tomorrow if I couldn’t. Looks like I can, though,” he remarked to himself.

His wife knew how well he could read and had written the letter simply enough that he could understand it. Since it was from her, Zenjirou had wanted to read it on his own, if possible, so he craned his neck over it and puzzled out the sentences.

“I’m pretty sure this word means temperature, so it’s about how it’s hot over there. I don’t know this one. How d’you read it? F...Free-ya? No, Freya? Oh,

Freya! Princess Freya’s struggling in the capital, so she wants to send ice? Hmm, I guess as long as she thinks it’s fine? She’s going to be in the inner palace eventually either way. Oh, I guess she’s going back to Uppasala afterwards, though. Maybe we shouldn’t let her find out too much before that? The country’s like Scandinavia. The heat of the blazing season has to be hell for a princess from there. I’d like to help her, but...”

There didn’t seem to be anything particularly important in it, but Zenjirou enjoyed himself piecing together the letter from his wife.



Two days later, Prince Largo arrived according to their scheme.

“Your Majesty, I offer you my thanks for accommodating my selfishness today.”

The middle-aged man clad in purple finery bowed his head deeply to Zenjirou where the latter relaxed on the sofa.

“Not at all. In fact, I wanted to take the time to speak with you as well,” Zenjirou said, bidding the man to sit.

“Excuse me, then,” he replied, seating himself before turning his gaze to Zenjirou.



Largo Sharou, the fifth prince of the current king, Bruno III. He was thirty years old and looked his age. His eyes and hair were both dark brown and his mustache of the same color was well-maintained. The deep purple clothes fit him perfectly, and he was the very image of refined royalty.

However, there was a slight sense of unease in both his bearing and expression, so it was hard to say that the flower of royalty was in full bloom here.

“Your Majesty, I have brought this as a symbol of my regard. Please, take a look.”

Once he had finished the statement, the prince turned to the attendant behind him and gave further instructions.

“Excuse me,” the attendant said, opening up a carpet.

Dozens of red and brown threads were embroidered in a pattern across it, making it lavish enough that though it was a carpet, it was suitable for royalty. But its true value was in the mana rising from it.

“You use it thusly,” the prince said before switching to the language of magic. *“Float.”*

The short chant had the effect one might expect, and the carpet began to float in place.

“And this is?” Zenjirou asked, leaning forward in interest.

It likely used wind magic. There was a loud whooshing sound as the carpet floated about thirty centimeters off the ground.

A magic carpet.

The country as a whole reminded him of the Middle East, and his expectations had been blown away.

“Is it possible to ride on it and travel?”

Unfortunately the answer was a rueful smile and a shake of the prince’s head.

“It does not work like that, no. As you can see, it simply floats in the air; it cannot move from there.”

“I see...”

The prince gestured, every bit the salesman as he added to the explanation now that Zenjirou’s excitement had abated.

“This floating carpet is a magic tool given when children are first able to walk. As you can see, it floats in the air, so the surface is soft and fluffy to stand on. Therefore, a child cannot hurt themselves should they fall. While it may be too soon for Prince Carlos yet, children grow shockingly quickly. He will be able to play atop it sooner than you think.”

“I see.” Zenjirou nodded in admiration.

In other words, this was essentially a big toy for children. Shopping malls had areas for children with air-filled play equipment. This was essentially a magic version of that.

“It is greatly appreciated, Prince Largo.”

His expression must have shown the sincerity of his words, and the prince let out a slight breath of relief. Making a good impression with your gift made negotiations afterwards more likely to go favorably. It was a cheap tactic, but the fact it was still used showed just how effective it could be.

“Incidentally, Your Majesty, I have heard that you have been asked to consult on gifts for the four dukes. Have you already made a decision?”

There was an unmistakable air of tension in his face as he spoke. Zenjirou hadn’t expected him to start out with that, but he also felt that they needed to discuss it.

“No. I have seen past documents and heard several people’s opinions and am considering them, but I have yet to form an opinion of my own. I have several possible candidates, though.”

The nerves on the prince’s face clearly faded at his question. His face had “I made it” all but written across it.

The prince then turned around to the people guarding and attending to him and spoke. “Fall back,” he instructed them.

“Yes, sir,” they replied, moving back from where the prince sat.

“More.”

They moved farther away.

“A little more.”

And again.

“Once more.”

They moved no farther. Apparently, his voice didn’t carry that far.

Zenjirou cast his eyes to the still active magic carpet. It was using wind magic and still making that slightly noisy whooshing. The sound must have been interfering with their voices carrying.

Finished with his checks, the prince looked seriously at Zenjirou and spoke.

“Your Majesty. Could I trouble you to also have your subordinates fall back?”

It was a blatant invitation to a private discussion.

Zenjirou hesitated for a moment, but there was no way he could refuse after things had progressed this far.

“Very well. Eladio, you and your men fall back.”

“Sir.”

Soon, the two royals facing each other on the sofas were all who were left. While all parties were in the same room, the magic tool with its wind magic meant that moving away from the pair also made their conversation inaudible.

As another likely precaution, the prince put his elbows on his lap and folded his hands in front of his mouth before beginning to speak.

“My thanks, Your Majesty. Subterfuge is meaningless at this point, so I shall simply ask bluntly: how familiar are you with our country? Particularly in regard to the relationship between the Sharou family and the four dukes.”

Zenjirou partially closed his eyes to call up the relevant memories and then answered. “I do believe that I am only really aware of the basics,” he admitted before summarizing what he knew.

The four dukes were indigenous people, and their families were tribes that

lived nomadically in the desert. Two of them had settled while the other two had continued the nomadic lifestyle across the sand.

The two families that had settled were loyal to the Sharou family, while the two that still roamed had a strong desire for independence.

The prince nodded along seriously, and when Zenjirou indicated he was done, he let out a deep sigh.

“I see. From my own viewpoint, your knowledge has no clear mistakes. I would say, though, that it is more focused on the history of our country and is less relevant to the current state. I would like to add to that information. Naturally, I would welcome you confirming its veracity at a later date.”

“Very well. I would be glad to hear it,” Zenjirou answered with a slight nod.

“As you indicated, the four dukes are currently split into two factions. The Elehalieucco and Reierfon families still call themselves ‘tribes.’ Conversely, the Elementaccato and Animeeum families placed themselves closer as vassals and decided to settle. Tradition or reformation. Independence or vassalage. Those were the two factors that were originally most different between the families. Another thing now divides them, however. Economic disparity.”

“Ah, I see how it is.” While Zenjirou was not particularly wise, he could get an approximation of the circumstances from that comment. Regardless, he still asked to confirm that he wasn’t mistaken. “Are the gold and salt that profitable, then?”

Fortunately, it appeared his conjecture was accurate.

“They are,” the prince confirmed. “The Elementaccato family, with their gold mine in the desert, along with the Animeeum family’s vast quantities of salt, have amassed both of them a sizable fortune. I would also add that the water the Animeeum family can obtain from their salt lake is even more valuable than the salt.”

It was obvious in hindsight. Between a nomadic and fixed lifestyle, the latter would be easier for obtaining stability. Stability meant extra energy, and extra energy could be converted into profit.

If the same situation continued for generations at a time, the economic

disparity between the nomadic and the fixed families was all but inevitable. However, that gave rise to another question.

“That would be rather generous of the Sharou family, then. After all, you have the drakes that lay the golden eggs under the control of vassals.”

The gold mine and salt lakes were unmistakably large sources of income for the country. A normal country would likely take both territories under the direct control of the royal family.

The fifth son of the king grinned broadly at the somewhat rude statement. “It suits the Sharou family just fine as well. Mining gold from the earth along with separating water and salt are both by no means easy. The Elementaccato family has their capital around the mine. The Animeeum family has theirs by the salt lake. Neither location is hospitable without magic tools, being in the middle of a barren desert.”

“That certainly is an efficient distribution,” Zenjirou said after a sigh of realization.

In other words, once both families had decided to settle, the Sharou family had them over a barrel. They offered a lifeline via magic tools to defend against sandstorms, create drinking water, and maintain the land to support a minimal amount of crops. A lifeline in quite the literal sense.

Instead of mining and extracting gold and salt in the harsh desert, they could sell magic tools to those who did and reap the benefits at the same time.

“Economic disparity then leads to a population disparity. There are already more than twice as many people belonging to the settled families as compared to the nomadic families.”

“Then...you cannot call the families equally ranked at this point?” Zenjirou asked, shocked by the higher disparity than he’d expected. If the families were several times more powerful economically, and at least doubly so in terms of population, it became impossible to treat them equally.

Prince Largo gave a half smile and refuted his comment. “Things have not progressed so far as yet. While that is the case, the Elehalieucco and Reierfon families have passed down their strength and soul throughout the years. The

men are a given, but even the women and children will take up arms and fight should it come to it. They are proud warriors, and disregarding them would be foolish.”

“That...” Zenjrou was lost for words. Two of the families were economically much more powerful. While the other two were far less so, they were stronger militarily. The only way he could see it was akin to a tinderbox, at best.

“The Sharou family is split into two major camps regarding how to resolve the situation. The first is to promote the current differences and demote the two wandering families to remove the confrontation. The other is to go against the flow and offer aid to the two wandering families and at least somewhat bridge the financial gap to avoid the confrontation. My father and brother are proponents of the former. To be frank, I am a proponent of the latter.”

Zenjirou could feel the control of his expression slipping away under the deluge of vital information causing his head to ache. With things progressing as far as they had, though, he had to abandon the attempt.

“Why do you wish to elevate the two wandering families? Surely between independent tribes and vassal families, the latter is far more aligned with the royal family’s benefits?”

The middle-aged man shrugged slightly at the question before answering matter-of-factly. “I simply believe that to be the best course. The Elehalieucco and Reierfon families are the foremost and second foremost of the families. They control huge amounts of land and maintain our borders with other countries. Nomads are the most suited to maintaining such broad borders across the desert. With a view to the country as a whole, it would be a loss if they were to settle. However, if they were demoted to being marquis-headed families, would they protect our borders to the same degree and with the same zeal as they have done thus far? Personally, I believe that to be far too selfish a request.”

“I see.”

Zenjirou could accept the explanation. Those families would be on the front lines if the worst should come to pass. He could certainly see how being treated as inferior to those families farther inland throwing money around would lower

their motivation. In a certain respect, it was practically a given for the royal family to offer aid in order to maintain that strength and loyalty.

There was, however, a risk that going too far with it would cause problems considering their sense of independence. Raising them up too far could make them hard to control.

“So this difference in policy is the point of contention between the crown prince and yourself? If you could make an agreement on that front, would you still oppose his ascension?” Zenjirou asked, pushing down his nerves to press the figurative detonator.

The prince shook his head sharply. “No, it is not that big of a problem. While I personally feel that raising up the two nomadic families is more beneficial in the long term, I do not think that it is a *mistake* to allow the two settled families to grow as they have been.”

“Then, what...” Zenjirou was about to ask in confusion why he opposed it, but the prince forestalled him.

“I do not oppose my brother’s ascension in the first place. Have I ever publicly said words to that effect?”

“What?” Zenjirou asked flatly, losing all sense of decorum.

The prince explained patiently. “Ah, it is not only you,” he assured him. “Most of the nobles in the country have the same misunderstanding. Well, more accurately, have been *given* the same misunderstanding by my father and brother’s information manipulation. I have never once wished to sit upon the throne, though. I am conservative by nature, and my brother is suitable in terms of lineage, achievements, and ability, so pushing him away from the throne to take it for myself gives me ulcers even imagining it.” He shook his shoulders in an uncomfortable shudder as he spoke.

“Wait a moment. Did you not ask His Majesty to reconsider during the earlier event?”

“The part I wish him to reconsider is the immediacy. The throne passing from my father to my brother itself is something I have no objections to.”

Unable to parse the chaos, Zenjirou followed his instincts in an attempt to

understand any more that he could and asked a series of questions.

“Then why are His Majesty and His Highness controlling information like that? Why do so when you support his ascension?”

“Because I will absolutely not accept how things will go after my brother inherits the throne.”

“What will you not accept?” Zenjirou asked in puzzlement.

The prince heaved a deep sigh and then spoke quietly, as if to only let out the slightest remnants of air from his lungs. “The appointment of Prince Francesco as the crown prince.”

“Ah?!”

The prince didn’t miss the flash of understanding in Zenjirou’s eyes. “So you know the real reason the fool cannot be king despite being the king’s grandson.”

Francesco was currently twenty-five and would ordinarily succeed his father to the post of crown prince. However, he had been judged as unsuitable and not granted a place in the line of succession.

Zenjirou knew the true reason, though. Francesco held not only the Sharou family’s lineal magic of enchanting but also the Gilbelle family’s healing magic. To put it bluntly, the royal families had a vested interest in keeping the lineal magics to themselves.

There would ordinarily be only one royal family in a country, so most royals simply needed to make sure their blood didn’t spread past their borders. However, the Twin Kingdoms had, as their name implied, two royal families.

Despite each family doing its best to avoid their lines mingling, the passing of years and number of generations made it unavoidable. As a result, while rare, members of the Sharou family awakened to healing magic, and the converse was also true. Therefore, there was a secret contract between the two families.

“Should a member of the opposing royal family awaken to lineal magic of the other line, they will remain celibate for the rest of their life and their direct line will end there.”

Since that agreement had come into being, it had applied to those who could not use their own family's lineal magic but could use the other family's. However, it also applied to those who could use both.

With that said, Francesco's abilities with healing magic were top secret and only known to the uppermost layer of the Twin Kingdoms's society.

I seem to remember him saying that the only people who knew were the king and pope, his parents, and the person who taught him healing magic. Prince Largo shouldn't fall under any of those categories.

"I apologize, but with Prince Francesco's personality, I can well understand why King Bruno would not offer him a place in the line of succession," Zenjirou obfuscated despite knowing it was already likely too late.

It seemed it was indeed too late, as the prince hid a smile behind his brown beard. "Publicly, indeed. I *am* still royalty, though, and I have heard of the secret contract between the Sharou and Gilbelle families. I also investigated things related to magic. Above all, I am aware that those with at least double the magic of an average royal would be able to theoretically use more than one lineal magic."

"That is an intriguing theory."

Apparently, Prince Largo was offering a conjecture at the truth but with a high degree of certainty. While he had to reply in a rather roundabout fashion so that it could not be taken as a commitment, Zenjirou had to admit the validity of the statement.

"So the king and crown prince wish to appoint Prince Francesco as the next crown prince and you are against that. Is that the point of contention, then?"

The other man nodded quietly in answer to his question. "Indeed it is. My brother is an accomplished statesman. I do not agree with all of his opinions, of course. However, when he ascends to the throne, I will follow my brother and naturally act as the vassal I should. However, the matter with Francesco is different. I cannot allow him to become the crown prince and therefore the next king."

Zenjirou could well understand the curt statement from the prince. He then

continued to make sure his presumptions were correct. “I see. I mostly understand the situation. King Bruno and Prince Josep’s collusion in the surprise attack was not itself to get Prince Josep on the throne, but to install Prince Francesco as the next crown prince?”

Francesco was currently twenty-five and had no place in the line of succession. Even collusion between the king and crown prince had its limits.

For example, if another ten years passed and Francesco still had no place in the line of succession at thirty-five, even the current king and crown prince would find it all but impossible to name him next in line. Thirty years of life with no place in succession permitted to him would cement the nobility’s impression of him as someone well out of the running.

“I can understand why they would spread rumors that you wish to take the throne yourself. If they paint you as someone unfairly after the throne, then it leads to your words lacking weight.”

“Your insight is correct,” the prince answered with a refreshed expression.

Spreading those rumors was equivalent to tying his hands in the royal court. Crown Prince Josep had the lineage, ability, character, support, and everything else he would need to be the next king. Who would lend the words of a younger prince after what was rightfully the crown prince’s any weight at all?

Even if Largo said that he didn’t want to be king and that his brother was the only one for the throne, they’d just assume it was something he was saying for the public’s benefit. He only wanted to delay things to prevent Francesco from being the next crown prince, and that was completely unbelievable to others. From his perspective, he was all but backed into a corner.

Royals of the big countries like this sure are something, Zenjirou thought to himself, forgetting his own position. They indirectly—but still mercilessly—pursued their own relatives while not publicly giving any impression but that of loyalty.

In fact, there might even be familial affection there, but they still had their political positions to scorn without mercy. Being able to do that was the sign of a talented royal.

“Still, if the two of them are statesmen of such foresight, I cannot see why they are so particular about Prince Francesco.”

With the secret contract between the two royal families, Francesco approaching the throne was nothing but an invitation for chaos. Things didn't quite fit as to why they would be so stubborn about it.

Largo then gave a sigh as if remembering something he had long since given up on. “It is unavoidable. My father and brother are for unification, and complete unification at that.”

“Complete unification?” Zenjirou asked, repeating the unfamiliar phrase. It sounded somewhat ominous.

“The Unity Faction are as the name implies, a faction that dislikes our country being run by two royal families abreast and wishes to change it to one with a single head of state. The Total Unity Faction is a subset that wishes for the families to completely intermarry and for both enchantment and healing to be part of a single family.”

The existence of that faction made Zenjirou's doubts, which the prince had personally denied, return to the fore.

“Prince Largo, forgive the base nature of the question, but is there no doubt that Prince Francesco is truly Prince Josep's child?”

“Indeed, that is most definitely the case,” he answered meaningfully.

Zenjirou was almost certain his guess had hit the mark but questioned further to make sure of it. “And is this Total Unity Faction made up of people from the Gilbelle Papacy as well?”

“Indeed. There are few of them, but I have heard that they have ties to the cores of both families.”

“I believe there was a member of the Gilbelle family whom Prince Francesco referred to as a teacher,” Zenjirou stated.

The teacher in question was, of course, his teacher for healing magic. Someone *who* secretly taught him how to use it. He had thought nothing of it when Francesco had first mentioned it, but who *from* the Gilbelle family would

teach what was effectively their trump card to a member of a family they were political opponents of?

“That would be Prince Charles of the Gilbelle family. As you have discerned, he is indeed a member of the Total Unity Faction. He was also close to my brother and his wife, Tosca, during their childhood. Ah, Crown Prince Tosca is from a branch family, but she is certainly a member of the royal family and a skilled enchanter in her own right. Naturally, she too is a member of the same faction.”

Ignoring the heavy lump in his stomach urging him not to continue any further, Zenjirou voiced the decisive question. “Is this Prince Charles perhaps *unusually* fond of Prince Francesco?”

For better or worse, the meaning behind the question made it to Prince Largo. “Indeed. Prince Charles sometimes seems even more fond of him than Josep on occasion.”

Zenjirou gave a laugh. “How nice. Prince Francesco is a lucky man. Why, it is almost as if he has two fathers.”

“Truly. To say nothing of both fathers having fond ties to his mother. Unusual though it may be, you could well call it a happy family.”

Zenjirou was doing his best to laugh but honestly wasn’t sure whether his expression was really what he wanted. He couldn’t help the goosebumps across his skin at the lengths people would go for their ideologies.

The impression he’d got from their discussion—for all that it had been negotiations requiring him to be on guard—was of a genial gentleman.

Well then...royals of the bigger countries really are something.

He couldn’t help feeling a sense of fear as the man had completely hidden his intentions and taken measures to see his goals realized. However, Zenjirou wasn’t totally focused on the crown prince’s secrets and the truth of Francesco’s birth. He took a measured breath before continuing.

“I see. I can certainly sympathize with what you are saying on a personal level. However, I am unsure what I can truly do from my position.”

Assuming everything he had just discovered was true, Zenjirou would rather support the prince opposite him than Josep. Considering things calmly, though, it was an entirely sentimental reaction. Everything the prince had told him was nothing more than a family matter. If he could obtain a healer for his beloved wife, then he honestly didn't want to stick his nose into that kind of problem.

His feelings were likely clear enough from his tone and bearing. The prince seemed to consider this the do-or-die moment and leaned so far forward from the sofa that he looked about to fall. He had wide, bloodshot eyes as he spoke.

"Your Majesty, what I am about to say is my own hypothesis without any proof. However, I am confident it would be eighty or ninety percent accurate. I certainly have less political capital than my father or brother. However, I see my brother more than anyone else, so I am also confident I have greater insight into his thoughts and next moves than anyone else."

Zenjirou waited silently. The prince was getting ready to say something completely earth-shattering. Zenjirou kept his expression as flat as possible as he listened.

"My father and brother are both eminently patient people in the pursuit of their goals. To be blunt, I believe they never intended to put Francesco on the throne."

The two were part of a minority faction even within the country. However, there was no small number of nobles who saw two royal families as an issue in the power structure of the country. They held similar thoughts to the Unity Faction, and could even be called latent unificationists themselves. This latent faction had a large say within the society of the Twin Kingdoms. Revealing the truth of Prince Francesco to the more circumspect of them could also build support for the Total Unity Faction.

Despite using their time so carefully and prudently, they had recently started to hasten things.

"More accurately, the increase in haste has come since Francesco and Bona have been staying in Capua."

Zenjirou had already been dragged into things. He didn't know the details yet, but he was sure of that much.

Prince Largo continued his explanation in a low voice. “Breaking the long-adhered-to contract and raising Prince Francesco to crown prince, and then the throne, is nothing but a foolish act that will invite internal strife. However, what if the majority of that attention could be directed to a foreign country? Say, for example, that this foreign country rivaled the Twin Kingdoms and had also just seen the birth of a prince who could control two sets of lineal magic. If one of the lineal magics this prince controlled was one that originally ought to have only belonged to our country, I wonder how much of a shock it would be to the nobles of the Twin Kingdoms. Why, it doesn’t even bear thinking of.”

Zenjirou couldn’t help but clench his teeth hard enough that it was audible.



There was another person he loved just as much as his wife: Carlos Zenkichi. Zenjirou didn't have the self-control to remain impassive upon hearing his son's secret uttered by a member of another country's royalty.

Largo knew that he had him and kept his brown eyes focused on Zenjirou's own dark eyes. "This is a clear threat. Measures need to be taken. If things go poorly, the Twin Kingdoms may use that country as a diversion. Then they can easily make things clear. 'It was classified until now, but we actually have a person who can measure up against this prince,' will be all they need to say. Naturally, they will still draw criticism from those not of their faction from both families that adhere to the contract, and there will still be chaos. However, with the imminent threat of a prince who has stolen our lineal magic, my father's and brother's political prowess will be more than sufficient to contain that chaos. That is, at least, what I believe their plan to be."

Having listened to all of Largo's hypotheses, Zenjirou remained still. The expression on his face was a clearly aggressive look that he had never shown to another person. If Rafaello Márquez had been there, he would have doubtlessly recalled the fears he'd once held. He had once called Zenjirou a monster. It was a way of showing that his feelings and values were so different from that of this world.

His remark that the nobles speaking to Zenjirou were effectively poking a drake with a stick not knowing when they might hit a nerve was exceedingly apt here. King Bruno and Crown Prince Josep were exposing his beloved son to danger for political gain, so they were clear enemies as far as he was concerned.

"Your Majesty?" Prince Largo called carefully, unable to hide his surprise at how much of an effect his words had had.

If Zenjirou had been an ordinary royal, then the king and prince's attempt would not be so serious. While exposing a foreign prince's secrets was by no means a good thing, Carlos Zenkichi's secret—enchanted—would have to become an open secret if it was to be used for the country's benefit.

If tacit consent to Carlos's existence and education in the basics of enchanting were on the table, then someone like Aura—while unhappy as a mother—would sit in the negotiation seat with a smile in her position as queen.

Such logic did not apply to Zenjirou, though.

“I understand. I would like to take some time to confirm this information for myself. However, should supporting information come to light, I would be willing to assist you. I understand we are short on time, so let us proceed under the assumption that you are correct for now. What is it that you wish of me?”

While rationally, he would wait to make a decision until he had more information, his impression of Bruno and Josep had dropped significantly.

It should have been a welcome reaction for Largo, but due to the reaction being stronger than expected, the prince looked taken aback for a while. Regardless, he pulled himself together and cleared his throat before looking seriously at Zenjirou and beginning to speak.

“Ahem. If you come to believe me, then I would like you to suggest greater consideration for the two nomadic ducal families—the Elehalieucco and Reierfon families—with regard to the magic tool they will receive.”

“That is all?” Zenjirou asked, surprised by the simplicity of the request.

Largo seemed to regain his composure at that and calmly explained. “Yes, that is all I wish of you. My father and brother are already aware that I have managed to speak with you like this. If you suggest favoring the two wandering families, they will also know you are standing on my side.”

The main point of contention between the three royals was whether or not to appoint Francesco as the next crown prince. However, that involved the secret contract they had with the Gilbelle family, so they could not just air it in public. Therefore the public reason for their disagreements would be how to deal with the four dukes.

Crown Prince Josep’s opinion would be for the four dukes to someday become two dukes and two marquises. On the other hand, Prince Largo’s would be to emphasize the importance of the two wandering families and maintaining the status quo with their ranks.

If Zenjirou voiced his opinion on that public problem, it would also inform King Bruno and Crown Prince Josep of his feelings on the ulterior issue. What Largo was asking would tell them he had changed his stance to align with

Largo's.

Zenjirou understood that but was still stumped and voiced his doubts. "Would the simple fact that I stand with you make Prince Josep give up on appointing Prince Francesco crown prince?"

Largo considered the question briefly before agreeing. "I cannot say for certain, but I believe it to be likely. To appoint Francesco to the position will require negotiation with you and Queen Aura. If you were to stand against it, there would be a clear impediment to those plans. Ideally, however, a specific magic tool that is so perfect, he has to go with it would be better than a vague suggestion of one that benefits the wanderers. Then adopting magic tools would externally be a concession to me. Therefore, it would become effectively impossible to appoint Prince Francesco crown prince due to my opposition. At least, it would be impossible to accomplish simultaneously."

"Indeed..." Zenjirou nodded with a bitter look. He understood well that he couldn't have things both ways.

Zenjirou only had a passing knowledge of magic, let alone the tools. Suggesting something so alluring that the specialists would be taken with it went far beyond just being difficult. He shook his head, switching his train of thought.

"Prince Francesco has no place in the line of succession. Therefore, he would ordinarily not be appointed crown prince when Prince Josep ascends to the throne. Who would normally be appointed?"

Prince Largo looked somewhat confused even as he answered Zenjirou's question, which served to cement the latter's thoughts.

"The next crown prince, I suppose, would be his second son, Vittore. However, it would be unlikely in the extreme to do so immediately upon his ascension. Vittore is still only seven years old. The norm would be for him to reach adulthood at fifteen before he was appointed."

"I see. Therefore, to those who do not know of the secret contract, which would appear more believable? Prince Josep appointing Prince Vittore to the position, or Prince Francesco?"

When he put it so directly, Largo could understand what he was implying.

“If there was a declaration that Francesco's suitability was still in question, then even at his age, Vittore would be accepted. After all, Francesco has not had the place in succession for twenty-five years. There *have* been crown princes of that age in the past. However, Vittore is our prince, so there is no need for royalty of another country to be concerned over that.”

The prince's look had a hint of aggression in it for the first time that day. It was a perfectly reasonable response for a member of the Twin Kingdoms's royalty.

Zenjirou's implied suggestion was to recommend Vittore for the position to make Francesco's appointment harder. It was impossible to take it any other way than strong interference in the internal politics of the country.

Of course, Largo would be against Zenjirou's unfair interferences. Wise or not, Zenjirou could easily predict that. Therefore, he was ready and kept a calm smile on his face as he replied with a prepared statement without a hint of hesitation.

“True. I suppose a king or crown prince of a nation like yours would *never* permit interference with the life of a child without even all of his teeth yet. My apologies.”

In terms of interference with internal policies, king and crown prince alike had already done so with attempts to involve Carlos Zenkichi.

The harsh rebuke had the prince looking pained for a moment.

“I am glad you can understand,” was all he could reply with.

Chapter 4 — Secret Moves in Earnest

It was the day after Zenjirou had received the shocking revelations from Largo. He had immediately started to make his moves.

If one didn't know the circumstances, it likely wouldn't look like anything remarkable. He had originally intended to carry out the bare minimum of meetings that he couldn't refuse and let everything else go. Prince Largo was the last of those meetings. So if one hadn't known that he hadn't originally been planning more meetings, his active acceptance of another request would seem completely natural.

"This morning, you will be attending a party held by Marquis Pisani and taking lunch there. This afternoon, you are meeting with Princess Margarita, and this evening, you will be attending a banquet at the palace," Lucretia informed him briskly from his side.

She was currently benefiting the most from his change of heart. He had originally intended to shut himself away and interact less with her as well, but since he had decided to actively pursue meetings, his interaction with her had inevitably increased.

Regardless of his agreement to meet with the nobility of the Twin Kingdoms, she was the best placed to offer an overall view of the relative statuses and the locations for such meetings along with their importance.

"If you have no other plans for tonight, I would be willing to act as your partner. I would also prefer to remain in the background for your meeting this afternoon. Is that acceptable?"

"It is and would be appreciated. My apologies for the burden."

"Not at all!" She smiled broadly.

Lucretia was actually being exceedingly helpful. She was attempting any and all means she could to appeal to him and had apparently decided to try to do so by showcasing her ability.

It was convenient for Zenjiro as well. *I'd rather she kept up these attempts, to be honest*, he thought to himself.

It was far better than her placing herself physically close or offering effusive praise for the most meaningless things. He briefly considered showing interest to get her to continue on this track but soon discarded the idea. Disregarding the unfairness and emotional side of things, Zenjiro was unsure he could feign interest and keep those attempts going without saying anything that could be taken as a commitment.

"Will the third uniform be sufficient for today?" he asked her.

She directed her big blue eyes up at the ceiling in thought.

"It will. There should be no issue on the whole. However, there is a dance during the banquet tonight, so you may wish to wear something easier to move in," she suggested.

"Very well, I shall do so. Could you give me a rough description of the dress you will be wearing tonight? I would rather avoid clashing with my partner," he replied after a moment.

Lucretia's eyes were big to begin with but appeared even bigger as they widened, and she began speaking in a fluster. "I could never. If you inform me of what you will be wearing, I will ensure my own clothes match."

"As far as outfits of that ilk are concerned, the woman should take the lead and I should match that, no?" Zenjiro wasn't precisely incorrect, but there were smaller issues that he had missed.

"You are a guest from afar, though. Surely my following your lead would be more logical?" she asked. Her cheeks seemed to redden slightly as she looked up at him through her lashes.

Zenjiro felt a frisson of danger and immediately retracted his statement. "I see. I shall take you up on your offer, then. Ines, select the clothes I will wear tonight."

"Understood, sir," the maid replied with a bow behind him.

Lucretia's expression looked like an angler whose fish had slipped the line just

before it was hauled from the water for the barest of moments. However, she soon returned to her usual affable smile. “Very well. Flora.”

“Yes, my lady?” her maid replied

“Coordinate with Sir Zenjirou’s maid to determine my outfit for tonight. I leave it to your discretion.”

“Very well, please do. Shall we, Lady Ines?”

“We shall, Lady Flora.”

With their lieges’ permission, the two maids moved slightly away and began discussing the matter.

It was still early morning, so there was plenty of time before the banquet. Zenjirou could be fairly sure things would be acceptable if he left them to Ines.

With that in mind, he turned his thoughts to the first item on his docket for the day—the party held by Marquis Pisani.



The Pisani family was one of the most distinguished families of the Twin Kingdoms, able to trace their lineage back to its founding. It was no exaggeration to call them on par with Lucretia’s family, the Broglies.

Both families were firmly loyal to the royal family, and both had blood ties if you looked far enough in the past, making them exalted even among the exalted. The current marquis’s wife was even the wet nurse for Prince Vittore, for example.

Vittore was the second son of Crown Prince Josep and would ordinarily be the next to hold the title and therefore the subsequent king. But he was still only seven years old and so beyond Zenjirou’s reach even given Zenjirou’s position as royalty from a powerful nation. Therefore, discussion with Marquis Pisani—who himself had connections with the young prince—was indispensable at the moment.

“It is an honor to be able to greet such a fine example of Capua, Your Majesty. I am the current marquis of the Pisani family, Alan Pisani. I look forward to making your acquaintance,” said the man in question, bowing deeply.

“I am Zenjirou, husband of Queen Aura I of Capua. I appreciate the personal invitation from the head of the family,” Zenjirou replied with his shoulders held high. He was sighing internally despite that, though.

Yet another important person. I was the one who took him up on it, so I can hardly complain, but there are too many people to remember. I feel like my brain's been put through the wringer.

His mental complaints were not without cause. Even narrowing the people down to those he *had* to remember, there were: King Bruno, Crown Prince Josep, Prince Largo, Prince Francesco, Shuura from the Elehalieucco family, Nazeema from the Reierfon family, Talajeh from the Elementaccato family, Fiqriya from the Animeeum family, Lucretia from the Broglie family, and now Marquis Pisani. With the future inclusion of the marquis's wife and Prince Vittore, his complaints were somewhat justifiable.

It would hardly be worth mentioning if he just needed to remember their names and appearances. However, he had to avoid the plots surrounding them and gather information, which meant he needed to know each of their relations in terms of blood and society, their abilities, and even their dispositions. A complaint or two was practically inevitable.

Either way, he had to focus on the man in front of him.

Zenjirou seated himself in the seat he was offered as the marquis mirrored him across a table. The table between them was a large, round piece of furniture, covered by a lace tablecloth. With the lack of sewing machines in this world, it had to have been made by hand. How much was it worth?

His instinctive hesitation to touch the cloth at that thought was proof that he was a commoner at heart, no matter his title. He managed to hide any of that hesitation as he put both hands on the table to speak.

“I have heard that you made a name for yourself as a valorous warrior in your youth. Could I trouble you to recount some of that now that we have had the opportunity to meet?”

Asking after martial skill like this was a common tactic for negotiations between men if the person in question had any inclination in that direction. It was like complimenting a woman's clothes or accessories, a safe opening topic.

The marquis was well aware of the implications with his high position in society. He laughed. "It was rather modest in truth, but I would indeed be willing to tell you about it. It was my first engagement, and I was still seventeen..."

His speech flowed like water as he smoothly explained his time on the battlefield from his youth. It was not an epic tale, but one with youthful failures and the amusing situations he made for himself. The story kept the interest of all those who listened.

"...so, I rode the line between bravery and recklessness, and with a great deal of luck along with a smattering of skill, managed to bring down the enemy commander despite his greater skill. Making it back alive was a significant achievement. Truly, I thought I was not long for this world back then. You often hear rumors on the battlefield of the men wetting themselves. Whether they're true or not, those men were far braver than I. Before I knew it, my pants were sopping wet and you couldn't even tell whether it was sweat or something less pleasant."

"Impressive that you lived through such vicious battles despite your youth," Zenjirou said, keeping the conversation moving with a marveling tone.

The other man shook his head with a rueful grin. "Well, it was truly closer to a single vicious battle. I rather lost my nerve at that point and have done nothing worthy of note since then. I enjoy hunting but am not particularly skilled. My wife tells me to have my subordinates shoot since it is a waste of ammunition to do so myself. Truly embarrassing."

The marquis guffawed and Zenjirou showed interest to keep the conversation moving.

"You have a taste for hunting?"

"Indeed. I have a good rapport with the Elehalieucco family, so I head to their capital once a year and take part in a real hunt. Though as I said, my achievements during it are rather pitiful."

"Interesting..." Zenjirou mused, tamping down the urge to leap for the unexpected link in the conversation. "That sounds splendid. Personally, I have little nerve for such pursuits in the first place and know nothing of war or

hunting. However, I still do have an interest in them as a man. Capua is densely forested and the Twin Kingdoms has wide plains of sand, so I assume the drakes that call the two countries home differ? What are the drakes you have hunted like?”

He had originally aimed for information from the man’s wife on the young prince. However, he would not refuse information on one of the four dukes either.

The marquis smiled at the indirect request to continue whether he caught Zenjirou’s ulterior motives or not.

“They are. The dash drakes would probably be the easiest example. Dash drakes from Capua are green, but those native to here are a light yellow—a sandy color, if you will. As their appearances would imply, the Capuan drakes do well in humid environments while the converse is true for those of the Twin Kingdoms. Still, both are called dash drakes, so they are indeed the same species and capable of interbreeding.”

The country, therefore, had crossbreeds which could at least manage in both environments. Francesco and Bona’s group had traveled via dash drakes and carriage, and the dash drakes they had used were those crossbreeds.

“I *had* heard that the best dash drakes on the continent were those from the Twin Kingdoms.”

Marquis Pisani puffed his chest up happily at the statement. “I am glad that such regard is true even in the west. However, strictly speaking, the best drakes are not those of the Twin Kingdoms, but of the Elehalieucco and Reierfon duchies.”

“I see. I suppose when considering their lifestyles, it is inevitable. You mentioned that you sometimes travel to their capitals. I assume that there are many dash drakes there?”

For the two nomadic families, “capital” referred to a large collection of tents around a larger one that belonged to the duke—or to the families in question, the chief. Everyone who lived there were nomads. Other than infants and the elderly, each had their own dash drake, which would naturally lead to a huge number of dash drakes around their capitals.

“Indeed. The drakes that belong to the family are the best of the best. I was actually gifted a male drake as a sign of my friendship with Duke Elehalieucco. It is a truly splendid specimen and would be coveted within the royal capital. Yet in *their* capitals, it is nothing more than one of many fine examples.”

“I suppose that’s what you get from the source. Though I must admit. I am curious. Which would you say is more like the source, the Elehalieucco or Reierfon’s stock?”

The marquis gave an exaggerated raise of his eyebrows before speaking in an even more deliberate tone of voice. “The general logic is that the Elehalieucco’s drakes are the strongest while the Reierfon’s are the fastest. Asking which is better overall... I say this with all due respect, Your Majesty, but I warn you not to make such statements around those from either family.”

“I see. Thank you for the advice,” Zenjirou replied with a chagrined smile.

Apparently, the question was one to which there was no agreed-upon answer, so it would inevitably lead to heated arguments. The question was, therefore, not a good one to ask.

“Also, speaking of rare drakes unique to the desert,” the marquis continued once he’d gotten Zenjirou’s agreement, “morph drakes are perhaps the best example.”

“Morph drakes?” Zenjirou parroted.

“Indeed. They do as their name implies and change. Well, the only thing that actually changes is the color of their hide. They are small, herbivorous drakes. Their dull movements and lack of offensive ability make them easy targets once you spot them. However, spotting them is much easier said than done. They are a light yellow during the heat of the day to become one with the sand. As the temperature drops, they morph to a dark indigo and are hard to pick out from the darkness.”

“How intriguing. I have not heard of their like before,” Zenjirou replied, his question implied.

“That is hardly surprising. They are only found within the Elehalieucco and Reierfon lands even within the Twin Kingdoms. There is a particularly large

number within the former.”

All Zenjirou could dredge up from his memories in relation to a drake—or rather reptile—that changed color was the chameleon. Even without having seen one before, Zenjirou’s image of a morph drake was cemented as that of a chameleon.

“The morph drakes are ideal first targets for children as they take up their bows. The creatures are fairly benign, yet hard to spot while still being easy to bring down.”

“What do they do with the drakes afterwards? Eat them, perhaps?” Zenjirou asked out of curiosity.

The marquis gave a slight shrug. “Unfortunately, they are inedible. They are not poisonous, but they taste disgusting and are little more than skin and bone. The nomads see them as pests to be exterminated.”

The morph drakes ate the same plants as the other drakes that the tribes reared. In addition, their shorter stature meant that they ate just the base of the plants but still destroyed the entire crop, leaving nothing suitable for the drakes the tribes wanted. With their livestock being the tribes’ greatest asset, the morph drakes were most definitely pests.

In truth, the detritus the morph drakes left behind would then fertilize the area for the next crop. However, the ecological understanding in this world was not developed sufficiently to realize that. Even Zenjirou wasn’t one to consider it so deeply and therefore accepted them as pests that harmed the nomads. He wondered if there was something that could be done with them rather than just exterminating them.

“What of the hide, then? Is there no utility to it?”

“Unfortunately, that is the least useful part of them. It is thin to begin with, so no matter how it is treated, the skin is unsuitable for armor, and as it changes color, it is not suitable for even decorative clothing or drake parchment. Well, the color persists once you expose it to a high enough temperature. However, that makes it brittle and hard, so it serves no purpose.”

The man had a somewhat regretful smile but Zenjirou was so shocked he

couldn't really take that in. "What? So the color-changing properties persist even after the morph drake has been killed and skinned?"

"Indeed. During leather production, the skin is soaked in water and boiled. When that happens, the colors change and it produces an unsightly mottled pattern and therefore has absolutely no value. The original color does not return even after completion. It is honestly rather impressive that something so useless can exist," he said, stressing just how little worth the morph drakes had.

Zenjirou let the latter half of his statement wash over him, though, and muttered to himself. "Natural heat-sensitive paper?"

The pieces were falling into place and he was thinking of a new magic tool. *I need to ask an actual enchanter about the details, but this seems promising. Has no one thought of this before?*

He'd found an unexpected hint as to a solution to the current situation and spent the rest of the meeting keeping the conversation going. Even as he did, however, his mind was spinning with the possibilities the skin might represent.



His meeting had given him a glimpse of a huge chance, but that didn't mean he could pull an immediate about-face. Currently, Zenjirou saw the most influential people in the country—King Bruno and Crown Prince Josep—as potential enemies. If it would help him avoid their notice in any capacity, he needed to act naturally. Therefore, he followed his original plan: spending the afternoon talking with the queen and thanking her for the enchantment on his wedding ring, and then attending the evening banquet with Lucretia as his partner.

"Wow. No matter what they try, Capua can't match that," Zenjirou mused to himself.

He was wearing mostly red formalwear and escorting Lucretia, who was wearing a green dress. His eyes were directed towards the lavish chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The main body of polished silver was much the same as those in Capua. The lights within it were beyond the other country's, however. They were magic tools of light. Not of fire, *light*.

They had been created as a collaboration between the Sharou family and another country's royalty that held light as their lineal magic. Therefore, it was something that could only ever exist within the Twin Kingdoms.

A mere eight light sources lit the entire room almost evenly in white light. Even the lamps that Zenjirou had brought with him could not measure up to them. It was perhaps a perfect demonstration of magic. The lights gave off no heat at all, making them completely cold sources of illumination.

A further look around revealed static flames on each table to heat the food in place. Mist generators around the space raised the humidity while wind tools circulated the air to prevent it from stagnating.

"Ah, it *is* the blazing season," Zenjirou commented.

Lucretia chuckled proudly. "Staying within the Purple Egg Palace certainly makes you forget the seasons," she said, tightening her grip on his arm slightly.

In truth, as the statement implied, he hadn't had much perception of the season since he arrived. It wasn't as cool as his air-conditioned room but was maintained at a pleasant enough level to be unremarkable once he was used to it. Being a desert rather than a forested country, the Twin Kingdoms were the exact opposite of Capua, with dry air.

Further, while the temperature during the blazing season was constantly above body temperature in Capua, it dropped drastically at night in the Twin Kingdoms. The temperature was much more pleasant most of the time, but the night was too cold, so walking around in your daytime clothes would have you shivering.

However, Zenjirou had not experienced any real variation in temperature during his stay in the palace's annex. The heat was kept in check by the mist generators and water circulation, which simultaneously kept the humidity high enough. Fire and wind magic tools kept the interior warm enough on cooler nights.

The annex naturally had no *light* magic tools, but the static flames illuminated the space to enable later nights. In terms of a pleasant daily lifestyle, the Twin Kingdoms was several levels above Capua. Of course, that was limited to the palace and its profusion of magic tools as well as a very few wealthy nobles.

Whatever the case, he strode through the room with Lucretia on his arm. He could feel everyone's gazes on him regardless of age or sex, but no one spoke to him. The norm was for the higher-ranked person to start a conversation. That part of their etiquette was common throughout the Southern Continent, and Zenjirou was grateful for it.

Conversely, with his current goal being to gather information and discover the connections between them, it meant that he had to do so proactively. He prepared himself and looked around, finding someone familiar. In terms of their standing, she was suitable as the first person he spoke to, he decided. With Lucretia still attached to his arm, he walked towards the woman.

She was unaccompanied by anyone who seemed to be a partner, so she appeared to have come alone.

"Talajeh. What a coincidence to meet you here." He smiled at the branch member of the Elementaccato family.

She was a voluptuous woman with blonde hair that fell in waves around her shoulders, wearing even now a dress that showed her deep cleavage as she smiled.

She gave a respectful bow. "Ah, Your Majesty. It is an honor that you would speak to me right away." She kept her head slightly lowered as if to invite glances down her cleavage, but directed her eyes upward with a victorious grin.

The creaking sound of gritted teeth from the blonde at his side was most definitely not his imagination. Personally, he would rather they didn't make it a competition. A more well-endowed person like Talajeh was certainly his type, but Zenjirou's heart was dedicated only to his beloved wife and son. He was here to secure a healer for her and to stop Carlos from being dragged into the country's plans. Those were the only things on his mind right now. He wasn't a prodigy by any means, and there was a limit to what he could keep in mind.

"I must say, though, that it would be hard to call this a coincidence, Your Majesty. I attend almost all social events held in the capital," she said as she raised her head. The movement brought a snake to mind.

"Oh, so you enjoy these events?"

“I would say that I consider them more worthwhile than enjoying or disliking them. These are places where people’s desires show on their faces. At the same time, it is at the forefront of fashion trends in clothing and finery. The information I can obtain here will pay for itself in time.”

It wasn’t a case of information being worth more than money, but of information becoming money, judging by her words, and it showed her personality.

“I see. It would appear the rumors of your acumen in business are well-founded,” Zenjirou said.

“You have business sense the likes of which you would never associate with a relation to the ducal families, Lady Talajeh,” Lucretia added.

While what they said was practically the same, the emotions in their faces and voices were directly opposing. Zenjirou was genuinely impressed and praising her, but Lucretia had implied scorn at her un-noble like behavior.

While she gave no reaction to the ridicule from Lucretia, Talajeh’s eyes sharpened slightly in surprise at Zenjirou’s praise. It seemed that Lucretia’s behavior was closer to the norm than Zenjirou’s in regard to a relation of one of the ducal families playing merchant and personally negotiating business.

He considered he may have erred before deciding it likely wouldn’t make much difference. “Incidentally, are your three compatriots not present as well?”

“Shuura went right back to the capital and Nazeema rarely leaves the palace outside of official functions. Fiqriya has been over there the entire time.”

As she spoke, Talajeh pointed towards a dark-haired and dark-eyed woman who had collared an attendant and was questioning him about something passionately. Judging by his clothing, the man was likely a mage working in the palace. Perhaps he was responsible for managing the magic tools present in the venue.

Only the Sharou family could *make* the tools, but anyone could use them. With that said, the only mages allowed to control them in the palace like this were handpicked.

Unsure what to say at the sight, Zenjirou deflected somewhat. “That...is

certainly one way to enjoy the night, I suppose.”

Talajeh couldn’t hide her amusement at his response. “She probably found some new magic tool. Fiqriya is always looking for more knowledge about them.”

“A spirit of curiosity is important.”

While he considered her part of the honey trap as well, she’d not spared him a glance. His attendance had been made public beforehand, so there was no way she didn’t know.

Was I just being oversensitive by assuming that? he thought suddenly to himself.

He’d felt they all seemed significantly friendly during their first meeting. However, a calmer consideration made him realize that it would still be the case to a certain extent due to his position. He at least couldn’t count Shuura—who had immediately left to return home—or Fiqriya—who was focused solely on questioning the mage—as part of it.

I still can’t let my guard down, though. It’d be easier if they were all as obvious as Lucretia.

Zenjirou turned his thoughts to the blonde on his arm. She seemed to sense his gaze and smiled slightly back at him.

“Is something the matter, Your Majesty?” she asked.

“No, nothing.” He shook his head in deflection. “Excuse us, Talajeh,” he added, bidding them farewell.

The only reason he’d even addressed her was that she was a familiar face.

“Very well. Enjoy your night, Your Majesty.”

“Thank you.”

As he wandered somewhat aimlessly, Zenjirou questioned the girl.

“None of the Sharou family are present tonight, are they?”

She seemed to leap for the chance to have him rely on her, and her hair bounced as she answered. “Indeed. Crown Prince Josep is the official organizer

of the party but is only lending his name so that the palace can be used. In all real senses, the party is being held by Marquis Pisani. He holds these as part of his duties but is not ardent about them and will likely only show himself towards the end for some minor greetings.”

“I see.”

He’d already had the general explanation, but to hear it so bluntly again was somewhat disheartening. Since the event was being held in Josep’s name, and implicitly in Marquis Pisani’s, he had hoped to be able to meet some more important people.

The person he most wanted to get into contact with currently was Crown Prince Josep’s second son, Vittore. As an intermediate step, he had the potential of Crown Princess Tosca and Lady Pisani, the prince’s mother and wet nurse respectively. He had therefore hoped that this banquet—which was under both of their husbands’ names—would be an opportunity to connect with them.

However, it seemed his hopes were in vain. He could probably meet the marquis himself if he insisted, but he had already done so that morning. There was little benefit in doing so again during the evening.

“Let’s offer our greetings to two or three others before leaving for the night. Can I ask you to select the people?”

On Zenjirou’s part, the request was given without any deep thought, but the girl’s reaction was dramatic. She started before answering.

“You can! I will introduce you to those worth your consideration. Perhaps Count Raymond would be a good start. He is the same age as King Bruno and an extremely genial person. He has many friends of all ages.”

“It’s in your hands.”

“This way, then.”

In the end, Lucretia was the one to gain the most. She was escorted by Zenjirou and even managed to gain the privilege of choosing who he would speak with.



While Lucretia was responsible for aiding him, that aid didn't extend to the bedroom.

"Good night, then, Your Majesty," she said.

"Right. I appreciate your help today."

Having somehow made it through the day, Zenjirou bid farewell to the girl who had been around him the entire day and entered his room.

The only people in the room other than him were maids from the inner palace who knew him well, including Ines.

"Ugh, I'm exhausted..."

Once he'd shucked the red clothing and was left in a T-shirt and his boxers, Zenjirou collapsed onto the sofa.

"Good work, Sir Zenjirou," Ines said as the younger maids quickly put his clothes away. She placed a silver cup of cold water in front of him.

"Thanks," he replied before downing the drink. The water seemed to reinvigorate him somewhat and he looked up at the maid, albeit from his slumped position.

"Ines?"

"Yes?"

"Did you get anything from the soldiers and maids?"

The middle-aged maid moved a step closer to the sofa before speaking.

"It has only been a day, so the information has yet to be scrutinized. However, with what I have heard from Kate, there is nothing to refute what Prince Largo told you. With regard to the Unity Faction, we have followed your instructions to avoid disclosing that information, so we have asked nothing directly and have no information. Frankly, we cannot yet confirm whether they truly exist or not."

"I see..."

While he was already aware of the fact, information like this could not be gathered in a mere few days. Zenjirou didn't have sufficient time, so he was

acting on the assumption that the information from Largo was correct, but he was also trying to gather corroborating evidence.

“Gathering evidence” might be too grand a term for listening to the rumors between the soldiers and maids. The knights and soldiers Capua had sent were furnished with a minimum number of maids. It was far from a true information network. On top of that, he was working on a deadline.

Zenjirou had been asked to consult on magic tools to give the four dukes as a gift, but he would need to offer his response within ten days at the latest. He needed to decide who he trusted before that time came.

Even as optimistically as I can make things, I doubt we'll have all the information before then. I'll need to make my mind up before I've got all the facts.

Ordinarily, he'd be able to feel an oncoming ulcer at the weight of his thoughts, but that wasn't the case today. If it was him, or even Aura—despite her having much higher abilities and resolve—then that would be one thing. But with the looming possibility of his son being dragged into politics here before he could even walk, he couldn't relax enough to feel that discomfort.

“Our current knowledge is that the nobles coming and going within the palace see Prince Josep's ascension as a matter of course. Things are more ambiguous with regard to the throne afterwards, but the majority seem to assume it will be Prince Vittore. Additionally, everyone appears to see Prince Largo as either a political opponent of the Crown Prince or someone who covets the throne himself.”

Zenjirou nodded consideringly at the detailed summation from Ines. None of what she'd found contradicted Prince Largo's information.

“Then should we consider Prince Largo's claims to be fact? Well, Prince Josep has not specifically lied either, so there is the possibility Prince Largo is doing the same. Honestly, it feels even less likely he'd come completely clean to a foreign royal like me...”

The more he thought things over, the murkier they seemed.

“Ines,” he said eventually.

“Yes, sir?”

Zenjirou decided that he couldn't pull himself from the bog of his thoughts alone, so he turned to the maid who was quickly becoming a highly trusted confidante.

“Has there been any movement from King Bruno or Prince Josep?”

“Not as of yet.”

“Hmm, that's really weird as well.”

They had gone so far as to call for an urgent meeting to stop Zenjirou and Largo meeting. Yet now that they had, the two had said nothing. That seemed even more ominous.

“Perhaps it isn't so important to Prince Josep? Or perhaps Prince Largo was indeed lying? There are too many people and too many plots. Whatever choice I make, I'll be playing into *someone's* hand.”

“Sir Zenjirou,” the maid's soft voice answered his groaning. “If I may interrupt?”

Zenjirou gestured for her to continue.

“The most important things are the costs and benefits to yourself and Capua as a whole. Taking that to its extreme, if it serves your purposes, is there any real problem with following either of their plans?”

“I see...”

Her question made him realize that he had been considering things too narrowly. In all likelihood, that was due to Prince Josep seeking to use Carlos Zenkichi as a political tool. He'd taken it completely emotionally and gotten his thoughts trapped in a desire to not permit it were it true.

Thinking things through more calmly, there was no reason Josep needed to suffer if he could guarantee his son's safety. Of course, such “reprisals” could also be a diplomatic advantage in the future. There was therefore no need to stop it if that would be possible. However, it was also not something he needed to insist upon to such an extent that it harmed him. Zenjirou was ill-suited to such heavy-handed diplomacy.

“The most important thing is making sure Zenkichi’s safe. That, and ensuring I have access to a healer for Aura and the child she’s carrying. Everything else is secondary, then?”

Squeezing out his goals, his thoughts suddenly cleared. He could ignore the plans that did not directly impact him. If he tried to control everything, he would inevitably fail and come off all the worse.

“Which means the thing I need to find out is whether the Total Unity Faction exists. Ideally, I should also have some proof that the king and crown prince are part of that faction so I could take Prince Largo’s word...”

“The ‘Total Unity Faction?’ The Twin Kingdoms’s system being formed of two equally ranked families certainly does cause issues. I can see why it would give rise to such a faction.”

Even so, the reigning king and his heir apparent being part of the faction without it being public knowledge meant that normal evidence gathering would be ineffective.

Zenjirou considered things. “But if both of them are part of the faction, it’s even stranger that the faction’s a minority. If I can trust what Prince Largo said, there are members in the Gilbelle family in it as well. It doesn’t seem to make sense that it’d still be a minority in that case.”

“Political factions are not just a product of the current situation. If you consider the length of the country’s history, then perhaps the monarchs who supported it were in the minority,” Ines suggested.

Zenjirou clapped in realization. “Right. It could be a way of thinking that’s not been the norm over the long term. That would make the two sequential kings who were in the faction a golden opportunity for them.” At that point, he noticed an implication in his own words. The issue wasn’t two sequential kings. The clincher came with the *third’s* position.

“What about Prince Francesco? Is he part of the Total Unity Faction as well?”

“Perhaps? I cannot make any firm claims, of course, but it seems unlikely from His Highness’s actions so far,” the maid answered. Her tone wasn’t definitive, but it was fairly certain.

“Right. That’s right. Prince Francesco was the only reason Prince Largo and I got to meet in the first place. He probably isn’t part of his father’s faction, then. Still, he’s definitely the key to this...”

Zenjirou fell into thought for a while and then made his mind up. The stiff expression on his face as he looked up at Ines didn’t suit him.

“Ines, I want to speak with Prince Francesco in as natural a way as possible. Do you have any idea how to make that happen?”

The capable maid tilted her head in thought before giving an awfully simple answer. “Perhaps simply doing nothing would be the best choice?”

“Huh?”

The firm look on his face morphed into a taken aback expression, prompting Ines to explain.

“I doubt that Prince Francesco, of all people, can simply sit in silence during this situation. Does prior experience not suggest that he will attempt to contact you if you simply wait?”

“Ah, right. I’m on a time limit, though, so I want to talk with him as soon as possible.”

“How soon would that be? I doubt he can wait more than a few days.”

“Oh. Then I guess we’ll wait and see for a few days,” he said, slightly anticlimactically in response to her utter surety.

Chapter 5 — Words of Gratitude

“Hi there, Your Majesty. I’ve come to have some fun.”

In the end, Francesco arrived the next day. Lucretia’s repeated apologies and hand-wringing brought Bona back to Zenjirou’s mind.

The prince showed no sign of recognizing the apologies those around him offered for his acts. Instead, he seated himself fluidly on the sofa before drinking from the teacup in front of him.

Zenjirou then asked after the princess in question. “Has Princess Bona not also returned for a period?”

“Hmm, I believe it will depend on Her Majesty’s plans when Bona comes back. There isn’t a firm date in mind, but I think she will be back in the next few days.”

“I see.”

Zenjirou had only ever really met with Francesco when he was accompanied by Bona acting as his minder. It seemed that role was specific to when they were in Capua, though. In that respect, the two of them traveling separately probably wouldn’t cause any issues.

“Well then, gentlemen,” Francesco addressed his attendants while Zenjirou considered that. “I am going to have a private conversation with His Majesty, so could you leave the room?”

“We cannot follow that order, Your Highness. We are your guards, and Prince Josep instructed us to not leave your side,” a knight responded crisply. The man was wearing a sword at his waist, surrounded by the mana of a magic tool.

Francesco frowned. “Hmm, I suppose you *are* my father’s subordinates rather than mine. Still, I don’t want anyone else to hear this conversation. I don’t suppose you could accommodate me?”

The directness of the negotiation seemed unlike that which royalty would

usually employ, but the guards and attendants moved away from the pair while still remaining in the same room.

Francesco immediately pulled four pieces of metal in the shape of rhombuses from his pocket and distributed them around the sofas that he and Zenjirou were seated on.

“*Sing*,” he commanded in the magic language.

The shapes started producing a grating sound as wind blew through them. The conversation must have been exceedingly sensitive if he’d bothered to smuggle in anti-eavesdropping magic tools.

“Your Majesty, thank you for accommodating my selfishness today,” Francesco said with a bow of his head. There were few royals from whom such a bow would be worth so little.

While Zenjirou was tempted to stress that it was hardly just *today* that he had accommodated the man, he had been waiting for this meeting.

“Not at all,” he replied, pasting a smile onto his face. “I would always do my utmost to have a meeting with *you*, Prince Francesco.”

“Truly, I can always count on you for tolerance. Thank you, Your Majesty,” the prince replied with a tug at his hair. He immediately leaned forward. “Then I shall take you up on that. Your Majesty, do you follow my father or uncle?”

The utter bluntness with which he brought up the topic would have left Zenjirou lost for words had it come from anyone else. However, Zenjirou had somewhat expected it with Francesco being his conversation partner.

“I have not yet decided. Honestly, I lack the information to do so. Therefore, I wish to question *you*.”

“What is it? I can tell you whatever I know.”

The prince’s easy smile made Zenjirou feel like his own caution was foolish.



Keeping his sigh unvoiced, Zenjirou started with questions that posed him little risk even if they became more widely known.

“Do you have a good relationship with Prince Largo? I only ask because I heard that he and your father have often found points of contention.”

The indirect nature of his question did not necessarily mean that it would be answered in kind.

“I do. Uncle Largo is a reliable person. I love my father and grandfather as well, but as I imagine you are aware, they are part of the Total Unity Faction. Their attention on me due to my control of both bloodlines’ magics makes spending time with them rather suffocating. In comparison, my uncle treating me as his foolish nephew is much more pleasant.”

Zenjirou had to do his utmost to ensure the sudden lack of tension didn’t send him slipping from the seat. Why had he even put so much pain into gathering information?

Even as Zenjirou raised a hand to his head as if to ward off a headache, Francesco didn’t stop speaking.

“My father and grandfather wish to put me on the throne. If not for that, they would be the perfect family. I have tried to warn them on many occasions that my ascension will mean chaos. It seems to have had little effect, though.”

“Then do you mean to say you have no personal wish for the throne?” Zenjirou asked after a pause, taking advantage of the lull in the deluge of revelations. He was mostly sure of the answer, but the risks, if he was incorrect, were too great. Fortunately, Zenjirou’s expectations were not betrayed.

“None whatsoever,” the prince agreed. “I have personally refused it, in fact. Were you aware that the king is so hounded by politics that there is no time for real enchanting? The rare exceptions where it is possible are for diplomacy, so you cannot even decide what you would make yourself.”

His look of horror as he shook his head made it hard to see the claim as anything but the truth.

“That is also part of why I want my uncle to succeed. The country should have

its systems remain in place. My father should ascend to the throne and Vittore should become crown prince while I focus on my research. That would be ideal.”

Having evaluated the prince through his entire speech, Zenjirou decided to believe him for the time being.

None of this contradicts how he’s acted in the past. Our interests should be aligned, then. If he doubted *everyone*, he would be completely paralyzed. He took a deep breath and then spoke with surety.

“So you are not part of the Total Unity Faction?”

“I am not. All I am is the unworthy son with abilities perfect for the Total Unity Faction born between a man and woman of the same, who cannot fathom the thoughts involved.”

The man had his usual foppish smile as he spoke. Still, there seemed to be something different peeking out from behind it.

“Prince Largo has said that Crown Prince Josep of the Total Unity Faction is scheming to see you as the next crown prince.”

“He is. Frankly, he and my grandfather have been planning it since they discovered my abilities,” the prince agreed with a nod.

“He is also the head of the opposing faction.”

“Also, strictly speaking, the only people who would endorse it are members of the Total Unity Faction.”

That was precisely why, despite the two royals’ positions, they could not publicly reveal their desires. Zenjirou focused right in on the prince to avoid missing the slightest shift before voicing his last statement.

“Prince Largo also said that the public reason for their disagreement is how to deal with the four dukes in the future. Therefore, if magic tools supporting his position are provided to the two nomadic families, your ascension can also be avoided.”

Zenjirou’s gaze was heavy enough to qualify as a glare and even Francesco seemed to feel its effect. The smile vanished from his face and he answered

plainly.

“That is correct. My father’s and grandfather’s strengths are their politicking and caution. If the selection of gifts falls my uncle’s way despite the situation being to their benefit, they will grow wary. They will not make a move that could serve to lose their strongest piece on the board—me—should it fail. Of that, I can assure you.”

Zenjirou’s resolve strengthened at his answer. However, before he could voice his decision, Francesco leaned so far forward that he was practically sprawled across the table between them.

“Does that mean you have an idea for a magic tool that even they cannot argue against?”

His green eyes were alight with a professional’s curiosity. Zenjirou leaned back slightly at his fervor and gave a somewhat ambivalent answer.

“No, just a thought that may become an idea. I am completely unfamiliar with enchanting, so I do not know whether it is possible. It could also be of no actual use even if it is feasible...”

“Please, tell me. I cannot make any judgment until I know. Come now, come now.”

“Well. It would be a derivation of dual burn parchment, I suppose. Is it possible to enchant things that do not *burn* but instead conduct the heat with the same spell?”

Francesco answered his question at a rapid pace. He also hadn’t leaned back, instead holding himself over the table with both hands on its surface.

“Not as it is, but it should be possible with slight modifications. However, materials other than drake hide will require much more mana. Additionally, while metallic ‘dual burn parchment’ could conduct the heat, it would not burn in the same shape as letters.”

That was just the answer Zenjirou had been hoping for. A smile made its way back onto his face as he spoke tensely. “Then if the most thermally conductive metal was drawn as thin as possible without compromising its strength and enchanted in that way and coupled with letter stamps of the same material and

morph drake hide...”

“Hm? Why would you use metal that transmits heat so well and in so thin a form? Oh, I see. That *would* leave the same letter as was sent. That would be rather difficult to...”

“If an expert like yourself were to wish to change things, then that would be fine. We have a deadline, so I would like at least a finalized idea by then.”

“A finalized idea? Honestly, this is too new and I fear it may be impossible to explain it sufficiently. I would say producing a prototype will make all the difference.”

Zenjirou let silence reign between them for a while before speaking.

“I *have* brought several of the jewels with me just in case.”

“Leave it to me!”

The prince consort and eldest grandson engaged in zealous discussion of the magic tools for the time it took the guards to grow weary to the point where they cleared their throats loudly enough to be heard over the anti-eavesdropping measures.



Nine days later, Zenjirou walked into a room of the Purple Egg Palace as the invitation from the king requested.

The people behind him carried the magic tool Francesco had created and other objects. The magic tool itself, being the most valuable, was cradled carefully by Lucretia. Francesco had given it his stamp of approval but Zenjirou couldn't entirely hide his unease. It was possible it would be rejected or else not work as it should during the demonstration. He had tested it the night before, but such failures were still a common tale.

Zenjirou's mind was filled with replays of the nightmare when the decoration they'd tested over and over hadn't actually opened up as it should on the day of the cultural festival in high school. The clash of imagined futures and remembered failures continued in his mind for a while before the king and crown prince arrived.

It was slightly rude to have made him wait when they had sent the invitation, but that was likely on purpose. It stressed how they were in a position of power. Complaints from Zenjirou wouldn't serve to help matters despite how much it grated on him. He simply maintained his smile and offered a small bow.

"My apologies for the delay, Your Majesty," the king said. "I am still a busy man."

"My apologies, Your Majesty," the prince echoed.

The smiles on both of their faces didn't show any sign of such scheming.

That's honestly even scarier, he thought to himself. His internal wariness ratcheting up a notch, Zenjirou offered a similar smile.

"Not at all. I can hardly fault a short delay when meeting with both the king and crown prince."

He didn't refute the fact that he had been kept waiting, simply accepting the apology.

Once the greetings and meaningless chatter were dispensed with, the three moved on to the main topic.

"So then, Your Majesty. I would discuss my previous request with regard to the magic tool."

As the crown prince brought the topic to the fore in a slightly hesitant way, Zenjirou swallowed slightly so it wouldn't be noticed. Then he began to speak, drawing on his prior experience from his job on Earth.

"Indeed. Having looked over the documents you provided and having discussed the four duke's positions with their representatives, I have come to a conclusion."

"Please, do tell," Josep pressed quietly.

Zenjirou looked straight at the prince's face. Even inspecting the man again, all he could see was a genial gentleman. However, this man was planning on bringing Zenjirou's beloved son to the forefront of political strife.

He tensed and then answered. "My conclusion is dual burn parchment."

“Dual burn...”

The prince and king’s gaze flickered to the attendants and the magic tool they were carrying.

While they may have known that Zenjirou had had Francesco make a magic tool, they had not managed to discover what it was. The old king and younger crown prince looked both surprised and let down by Zenjirou’s answer. But their expressions were only visible for an instant before being smoothed over by smiles as the crown prince questioned Zenjirou further.

“Was this your own idea, Your Majesty?”

“It was not. Nazeema of the Reierfon family was the one to ask for dual burn parchment to begin with.”

“I see. The family would indeed see much use for such a thing. While they may be referred to as a single group, each of the families has their own circumstances.”

While his words sounded like understanding, there was an implication of doubt that Zenjirou would simply use only one family’s opinion. He had been prepared for that, though.

“Indeed. Their other thoughts were not incorrect, but I personally believe that dual burn parchment will be the most advantageous to all four families.”

“I can certainly see that.”

Even the crown prince could not refute the claim. The benefit was most obvious to the nomadic families, as their capitals moved. However, the two settled families also had members living in both the royal capital and their own. Dual burn parchment would certainly aid all four of them.

Zenjirou continued his presentation. “However, there is a single disadvantage to dual burn parchment. I hardly believe that I need to explain it to those in your family, but the fact that letters are burned into it makes it inherently disposable.”

Its manufacture was relatively simple, taking little time in comparison to more complex tools. It could still take over a month to create a set, though. That put a

limit on the amount that could be produced, and they were not used without consideration.

“As I have repeated on several occasions, I am an amateur when it comes to enchanting. However, that itself may make my perspective different from those of the Sharou family. This began as a simple thought, but thankfully that thought was brought into a full item. I wish to demonstrate the results, minor as they are, to you here.”

“You may do so.”

Once the prince had given his permission, Zenjiro gave Lucretia the order.

“Excuse me,” she said as she came forward and briskly began setting up the magic tool.

The first things she produced were two sheets of metal that were about the size of an A4 piece of paper. Any inspection of mana revealed that these were the only enchanted pieces. The only blemish on them was a marble embedded in the center of each sheet.

The maids then produced several metal sticks. A closer look would reveal that each of them had the mirror image of a letter on their tips. While they were rather large, these were letter stamps.

Then, a maid wearing unseasonably thick gloves for the desert in the blazing season produced a sheet of dark indigo drake parchment. Most of the people present in the room were unaware that it was made from the skin of a morph drake—the very animal the desert tribes lamented as a pest with no use.

They followed Zenjiro’s instructions and placed one of the sheets on a table in front of the crown prince. Then they carefully covered it with the morph drake hide, followed by what were effectively paperweights to ensure contact between the two items.

The other sheet was placed in front of Zenjiro as the maids holding the stamps stood at his side. Everything was in order.

At the maids’ signal, Zenjiro nodded and addressed the crown prince’s attendant.

“My apologies. Could you prepare a heat source?”

“Your Highness?” the attendant asked his liege.

“Do so.”

“At once. Please wait a moment.”

The man left the room once he was given permission, soon returning with an immobile flame. “It is already active, so please take care. Do you know how to use it?” he asked.

“Thank you. I do.”

Zenjirou nodded at the man before taking one of the stamps from the maid and placing it inside the fire. Once it was sufficiently heated, he carefully pressed it into the metal plate. There was a metallic clink as the two pieces of metal hit each other.

Nothing happened immediately. And a period of waiting still revealed nothing.

“Wait, what is this?”

The change that occurred after several minutes was not on the plate in front of Zenjirou, but the one in front of Josep. More accurately, the one with the sheet of morph drake hide atop it.

The light mark was gradually spreading across the formerly dark indigo surface. Eventually, it formed a letter. The same letter Zenjirou had pressed into the plate. The heat didn’t cleanly transfer between the two media, so the letter was rather warped and difficult to read, but it was still legible.

“These two plates are enchanted in the same way as dual burn parchment. However, their metal construction means only the heat is transferred. They do not blacken with use. The top of your plate is covered with morph drake hide. They have the strange property of changing color with temperature, so placing it atop the plate makes it react to that heat.”

As he spoke, Zenjirou got into the swing of things, pressing letters to the sheet one after another. The impromptu stamps had been a rush order from a craftsman Francesco knew, so they were not neat letters in the slightest.

Zenjirou's movements were clumsy as he worked as well, so the spacing and height of the letters varied somewhat throughout the text. In some places, they even overlapped. Still, the white letters on the skin were more than enough to convey the meaning.

"Congratulations, new king."

Josep's face was deadly serious as he read the sentence in front of him.

A look at the king to his side revealed that his usual smile had also vanished as the man stared fixedly at Zenjirou's invention. Both men were accomplished politicians. Therefore, both immediately saw the value of a reusable dual burn parchment, even if it took quite some effort to create.

At the same time, they knew the four dukes would covet it. Rumors were insuppressible. Even if they rejected the idea here, the new dual burn parchment's existence and the proposal would become public.

Josep had been the one to originally ask for Zenjirou's aid. With that request being more than fulfilled, he would invite much displeasure from the four dukes if he refused it.

"Father..."

"Indeed."

Having navigated the currents of politics together for so long, a glance was all it took for them to come to an understanding. The prince cleared his throat to draw attention before looking up over the table at Zenjirou.

"You have my thanks, Your Majesty. I can now say that I was certainly correct to ask for your aid."

"In which case...Your Highness?"

The prince nodded solemnly at the happy expression on Zenjirou's face.

"I take my hat off to you, Your Majesty. I need not consider it any further. This new type of dual burn parchment will be the gift I give."

Zenjirou clenched his fist under the table and fought down a cheer. The request for dual burn parchment had come from Nazeema, a representative of the Reierfon family—one of the still-nomadic families. The main component of

this magic tool was the morph drakes, which mainly lived in the other nomadic family's lands. While fewer in number, they also lived in the Reierfon lands. They lived in no other location.

Anyone could see the focus on those two families. Still, the tool would be invaluable to the two settled families as well, so neither would show discontent with it. The metal plates were completely reusable, but the hide was consumable. Making them a truly general tool would mean the morph drakes would go from pest to resource. It might even serve to narrow some of the economic disparities between the two groups of families. Naturally, it would be like narrowing a lead of twenty horse lengths to nineteen, but it would still give them hope.

It would still benefit the Sharou family as well. The morph drakes' hides would have value *because* of this new magic tool. It was like the two nomadic families could make printer paper while the Sharou family could make the printer itself. Even if the hides led to economic growth, it would be economic growth under the control of the Sharou family. If anything, an increase in their wealth and a reluctance to give that newfound wealth up would make them more reliant on the royal family.

The only issue for them was that it was the opposite way that Josep had wished things to develop, and more in line with the goals of his opponent, Largo. Of course, he was not foolish enough to value his own pride over the country's gain.

"My thanks, Prince Josep. I would also like to thank you for being willing to offer the opportunity to someone who is as much of an enchanting layman as I am," Zenjirou said. He managed to keep his joy under control and his voice steady. There was an implied request to confirm that there would be no attempts to involve his son in their schemes now.

"We should be thanking you for such a wonderful idea. Frankly, I shudder to think of the nobles' reaction were I to refuse it now," Josep said, nodding several times.

Reading into that, it was probably along the lines of, "Fine, fine. I'll give up for now. It'll only be chaos if I pushed it through, so trust me."

Now that he knew his objective was accomplished, Zenjirou's earlier triumph was replaced by exhaustion. Naturally, though, he could not lie down on the sofa there. He straightened his back to remain upright and gave a standard business smile along with a polite laugh.

"I wager it will be no issue. Even I have heard of how much the citizens support you, Prince Josep. As long as nothing *unforeseen* occurs, I cannot see that support wavering."

"It does my heart good to hear that," the prince chuckled. "My thanks once again. I suppose I am overthinking things. As the saying goes, overthinking can be just as bad as not thinking at all."

"I quite agree."

The conversation then turned to a superficial friendly chat between the two countries' royals.



Once Zenjirou's party had left, silence fell in the room. The king was the one to break it.

"So we've been had."

"We have."

The prince's earlier easy smile instantly dropped to a near-expressionless look as he nodded. The king pinched his nose.

"Well, no matter. The results are still beneficial to us."

"Indeed. Bona's report that he would have thoughts that would never occur to us with regard to enchanting were even more correct than I had considered."

While it was useless for the goals of the Total Unity Faction, the results were beneficial enough to their positions as royalty. The two were obsessed with the former, but they had the political wherewithal to not let it unbalance them.

"A new dual burn parchment, though. We had conceived of a reusable version, but not in that way," the king remarked.

"It is no surprise. We are enchanters; our thoughts naturally tend towards

solving the problem solely through enchantment.” The prince shrugged lightly.

As their words implied, the value of reusable dual burn parchment was both obviously beneficial and something they had thought of. Some of them had considered using earth-aligned magic rather than fire to create a dual sandbox. Others had tried to create dual water pens that used water as ink.

However, whether dual burn parchment’s characteristics were unique to fire spirits or not, none of those avenues had borne fruit. What Zenjirou had suggested was to use the same vector and then make the tool reusable through outside means.

The breakthrough of the morph drake hide was something they had missed even within their borders due to the Sharou family’s fixation on magic tools, which were complete in and of themselves. Simply using a magic tool as the centerpiece and adding mundane items to it was something that would never have occurred to the Sharou family, if for no other reason than their knowledge of just how powerful the tools could be.

Of course, morph drakes being in the lands of the ducal families most removed from the crown was also part of it. Whatever the case, the fact remained that a foreign royal had developed a magic tool with clear benefits to their country in less than a month.

“I want to avoid selling this to other countries as much as possible,” the king stated.

“I quite agree. As things are, I cannot see us avoiding selling to Capua. We should refrain from selling to other countries, though.”

“Perhaps we could include a clause preventing their resale in the contract with Capua.”

The two of them were well aware of how beneficial fast information transfer was to a country. Father and son both had the same views and similar skills, so the conversation took barely any time at all.

“Hm...” the king mused once they had discussed things. “I suppose that settles things.”

“I should be going, father.”

“I suppose it is about that time. Deal with it as you will,” the king told his son with a wave as the latter stood.

“I will.”

The prince bowed to his father before leaving the room. He headed further into the palace, to the area where the royal family lived.

“This is sufficient,” he told his guards. “Good work.”

“Thank you, sir.” They saluted, remaining in the corridor as Josep continued on.

This was a completely private area where not even the guards or aides could enter. The walls were thick and unbroken by windows. Instead, magic tools purified the air and provided illumination. It was a small room for a palace.

Josep entered, shutting the door behind him. There was someone else already inside.

“Welcome back, brother. I trust the meeting went well?”

Josep showed no surprise at the room already being occupied. He simply seated himself on the plain wooden seat.

“It is a rare day where you arrive here first, Largo. The day was surprisingly tiring.” As he spoke, the prince unbuttoned the top three buttons of his shirt, relaxing defenselessly.

Largo was the crown prince’s younger brother. Publicly, he was also his biggest political enemy. The pair began to exchange information away from prying eyes.

“Judging from your demeanor, can I assume it was my win for once?”

“Truly, you should smile. It was completely your victory,” Josep said, lifting his hands above his head in surrender.

“That is a relief. Will the two of you refrain from the foolishness of making Francesco the next crown prince now?”

“For now, at least,” he agreed reluctantly.

“Well, I would rather you did so entirely,” the younger prince said with an

exaggerated sigh.

While the two of them were political enemies, they were also brothers who wished for the prosperity of the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle. Therefore, they had these meetings when one won out over the other to avoid any disaster, finding common ground. The topic this time was, of course, the visitor from Capua.

“Incidentally, what did you think of His Majesty?” Largo asked.

“Well, in terms of political insight, he is rather formidable. In terms of political *strength*, however, quite the opposite. The biggest thing I noticed is how hard he is to pin down in character. He often does not react in a normal way to normal words, so he can gain more than his abilities would imply,” the man said before pausing briefly. “His imagination is also surprising. It may have been mere coincidence, so I will refrain from judgment yet. In terms of his surface abilities and lineage, he is worthy of the recognition, though. I would take him in if I could.”

As far as Aura was concerned, Zenjirou was a Capuan. However, the truth was slightly different. Zenjirou’s ancestors were a Capuan prince and a princess of Sharou. He should have had roughly equal ties to both royal families. The evidence lay in Zenjirou’s own disposition swinging towards the Capuan side with his space-time magic. However, his son could yet manifest both.

This was despite the fact that Aura was purely Capuan. That showed more than anything that his blood ties to the Sharou family were strong.

“I really do want him. If it seems too much for Lucretia, we should consider other women. If he shows an interest in the women of the four dukes, we can get their cooperation as well.”

His brother sounded rather put-upon as the crown prince placed a hand to his chin in thought.

“Greed will only sour our relations with Capua. Please avoid that.”

“I know. Relax, Her Majesty is a rational person. I won’t misstep.”

“Truly, you are quite the piece of work...” Largo sighed. “The Twin Kingdoms are strong enough currently. We certainly need to increase that strength and

develop, but we are not in such dire straits that we need to cross a rotten bridge.” Despite having said the words on many occasions and knowing they would not be heard, Largo still said them.

“You need to think. While we are strong *on the Southern Continent*, we are still far below the church. Their center of power is developing techniques to cross the seas more quickly than ever. We cannot let our guards down.”

“Well, you are correct there...”

Both of them had heard of the four-masted ship from the Northern Continent that had arrived in Capua, so he had to admit his brother’s words held some weight.

The crown prince continued. “You underestimate their stubbornness. The church will not leave the White Empire’s descendants to their own devices.”

“Brother...”

Unable to muster any real argument, he fell silent again. His older brother had a point. However, he could not shake the idea that his wise brother was letting delusions from their distant ancestors sway him towards believing in an imagined danger.

Epilogue — Return After a Month

Zenjirou burned the image from the photo into his mind, closed his eyes, incanted the spell, and then opened them to the familiar sight of the stony room.

“Welcome home, Sir Zenjirou.”

The short spear-wielding guard’s greeting from his position under the brazier confirmed that Zenjirou had succeeded in his teleportation.

“Thank you. I will be returning directly to the inner palace,” he told the man.

“Understood. I will ensure that Her Majesty is informed.”

“Please do.”

Two of the men guarding the room followed along as Zenjirou’s escort as he left the room.

“Urgh...”

The wall of heat and humidity he had walked into made Zenjirou groan. It had been noticeable inside but was even more so now he had stepped out.

He was currently wearing the same outfit he had left in—the third uniform—with the first uniform remaining in the Purple Egg Palace.

Speaking of things that had been left there, his attendants—including Ines—were all still there as well. Instead, Zenjirou carried several missives from the soldiers and knights there. The comparatively thinner bundle compared to those entrusted to General Pujol was not due to a difference in popularity. Drake parchment was expensive even for lower-ranked knights, let alone general infantry. Few of them therefore would send two letters in such a short period of time.

Zenjirou followed the familiar corridors towards the inner palace. Once he arrived at the passage into it, he turned on his heel to address the guards.

“Thank you. Return to your posts.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Excuse us.”

Once they had moved to leave, he stepped into the inner palace. Back into his home.

That phrase being his association with the inner palace surprised even him.

“Huh, I really *have* made myself at home with all the luxury,” he said to himself.

They must have already been informed of his return, as the familiar maids were waiting inside for him.

“Welcome back, Sir Zenjirou,” the head maid greeted him.

“It’s good to be back, Amanda,” he replied. He didn’t have to watch his behavior and words here.

Zenjirou handed his hand luggage to Amanda and breathed a sigh of relief. He had his television, computer, fridge, and the LED lamps around the sofas. The profusion of magic tools in the Purple Egg Palace had made life much easier, but still, he preferred his own living room and electric appliances.

Plugging in the nearly drained camera to charge, Zenjirou tossed his uniform off and pushed open the door to the next room clad only in a T-shirt and boxers.

The bedroom.

As Zenjirou had hoped, the air conditioning was on and the chill air was circulating through the room.

“Ahhh!”

He basked in the cold air directly under the vent. Everyone said it was unhealthy, but he didn’t care right now. It seemed unlikely to be worse for him than bearing the heat to the verge of heatstroke.

Once he’d cooled down somewhat, he noticed a small bed. There was a small—at least in comparison to the massive canopied bed he and Aura usually slept in—bed to the side. While Aura was pregnant, Zenjirou would sleep alone, so it

had been brought in.

It seemed like the diligent maids had kept it made and ready even while he'd been away. Since the AC was on, the shutters were closed and the lights were on. It made the room feel one step closer to night.

"Just until Aura gets back..." he murmured, unable to resist the siren call of a nap as he lay down on his own bed for the first time in a month.



"Good morning. Sleep well?"

It was nearly evening and Zenjirou was greeted by the sight of his wife's smile for the first time in a month.

The lines of her body were slightly more rounded than before—perhaps due to the increased nutrition from carrying her second child—and she seemed generally softer than he remembered. Of course, he knew better than to *say* that, even if he was half asleep.

Instead, he smiled happily as he spoke. "It's good to see you again, Aura. I just—well, not exactly *just*—got back."

He pulled himself up from the bed and took his wife in his arms before giving her a light kiss. His gentle hold on her was annoying, but he didn't want to put excessive force on her already protruding stomach. Still, having her in his arms made him feel happier than anything else.

Aura let her eyes just drift closed as he held her for a while. After a long embrace, relaxing in the sensation of each other's body heat, Aura murmured into his ear, "Are you properly awake? If you are, I would like to talk in the living room. If it is too much for you, we can do so tomorrow, though."

Zenjirou flexed his fingers, considering how he felt. Since he had traveled through teleportation, there had been no real physical burden on him.

"I'm fine. Let's go."

"Indeed. You should at least put some pants on."

Her statement made him realize that he was still only wearing a T-shirt and boxers. He didn't bother with a proper shirt but pulled on a light pair of jeans

before heading out to the living room to sit opposite Aura. They sat like this for serious discussions, but next to each other for anything else. Zenjirou had completely internalized the unwritten rule, and he began the discussion.

“Where do you want to start? I tried to put a general sense of how things were going into the letter I sent.”

“Sorry, but from the start. I want to avoid the possibility of misinterpreting that letter.”

“Got it.”

He knew how poor his writing skills were in the local language, so he agreed and recounted what had happened since his departure.

“...so the Sharou family will soon be putting Crown Prince Josep on the throne. We managed to put a stop to them replacing him with Prince Francesco, though. I’d have liked to get a firm decision that Prince Vittore would do so instead, but I couldn’t actually manage that.”

“I see. The Total Unity Faction, then. I’ve not heard of the group before. However, I can certainly see how the unstable political system in the Twin Kingdoms could lead to such a faction. To think that both king and crown prince were affiliated with them and planning to involve Carlos, though... You did well in halting that, Zenjirou.”

He smiled at her praise. “It wasn’t something I did for the kudos. Zenkichi’s my son, after all. I need to think about our second child as well, though. Speaking of, I *did* say it earlier, but they agreed to send a healer for a month around the expected delivery date. Anything else depends on negotiating with Pope Benedict of the Gilbelles.”

“Indeed. I am grateful for how much effort you are expending for both me and our child. However, we are both healthy, as you can see. If we have a healer for the birth itself, there is little need for anything else. If the meetings are already scheduled, then you will of course return. If I were to be frank, however, I would prefer to have you back here over having a longer period of time with access to a healer.”

It sounded like a passionate plea, and it set Zenjirou’s cheeks ablaze. His

expression melted into a sappy smile at the same time. “Right, got it. I’ll have the next stay be ten days, then. If it doesn’t look like we’re getting anywhere at that point, I’ll just head back.”

“Very well,” Aura said, marking the end of what was originally the main reason for his journey in the first place. Then she frowned slightly and brought the topic back to magic tools. “I would like to discuss the new type of dual burn parchment you suggested.”

“Yeah?” He barely needed to see her expression before he cast his eyes down.

“This is honestly a large issue. It could even—if you will pardon the exaggeration—mark the end of an era.”

“You’re right.”

It had protected his beloved son, so he didn’t regret it. Still, he knew he’d given another country a big leg up. However, the point Aura was driving at and Zenjirou’s regret were slightly misaligned.

“The problem is that Carlos’s involvement prompted you to present that idea. It is actually unwise.”

“What do you mean? Should I have let him get caught up in it?”

Aura kept a calm expression as her husband’s eyes hardened slightly, and shook her head. “The first problem is that you have shown the insight and innovation for such a groundbreaking magic tool. The second is that it shows Carlos as a worthwhile point of leverage for you.”

“Ah!” Zenjirou paled as he realized what she meant. “I’ve shown that threatening him works, so people will do the same in future?”

Aura nodded, the expressionless mask of the queen on her face. “There is the distinct possibility.”

He’d put the effort in to *protect* his son, but it seemed like he might have increased the risk in the long run. He just couldn’t stand it.

“Damn it!” he yelled, pounding his fist into the sofa. He didn’t usually lose his temper, but Aura maintained her expressionless look as she spoke.

“Therefore, we need to make sure this costs the Twin Kingdoms to ensure the point is made. To begin with, we will make a written demand to be provided with several of the new versions for no charge. We will also demand the same rate as domestic sales for further purchases. We are to be considered with the same precedence as the Sharou family and at a higher precedence than the Gilbelle family. I will prepare official documents to that effect tomorrow, so you will need to hand them to King Bruno.”

“Got it.” He nodded with a hard look.

Aura’s expression returned to a smile. “You need not be so tense. You did exceedingly well there. At the very least, you made no irrevocable mistakes. Take heart.”

“Right. Thanks, Aura.”

The tension edging towards irritability vanished from his face at her words. Once she saw him relax, she continued.

“Now then, why not partake in a bath before dinner? Considering you simply went straight to sleep, I imagine you still have quite the sweat worked up. You can wash out the perfumed oil at the same time.”

“Yeah, sounds good. What about you?”

She shook her head. “I am in this state, and Doctor Michel has repeatedly stressed that I am not to bathe without several attendants. Unfortunately, I will not be able to join you.”

A truly disappointed look made its way onto Zenjirou’s face at that. “Ah. Right. Got it. I’ll head in on my own, then.”

“Enjoy yourself.”

Aura watched him collect the LED lantern and other bathing essentials and leave the room before letting out a sigh.

“His judgments have finally parted from my own,” she mused to herself. “Still, it is something of a miracle it did not happen even once until now.”

She considered the conversation they’d just had. Aura would not have allowed the two royals attempting to publicize Carlos Zenkichi’s secret to

influence the negotiations. It could certainly lead to risks from their neighboring countries, but that was inevitable to one degree or another when you were born royalty. At the very least, she would not have yielded as easily as Zenjirou. Even if she would have, Aura would not have thought of something so novel that it would not have mattered. Regardless, while they could recover from this, they could not look optimistically on it in the long term.

“His perception is far beyond my initial estimates, but my husband is certainly not royalty by birth. I knew this, but providing support in those matters is my duty...”.

This slip would not be the only one. Zenjirou couldn’t manage to play the power game when it came to using his own child’s life as a chip. That was nothing special. Commoners were highly likely to be that way. Nobles with emotions that ran so deeply were not uncommon either, and even some royals were the same.

Those people, if they were supported, could build strong relationships of mutual trust that normal royals could not. It was a matter of aptitude on the whole.

“Therefore it is up to me to provide that support. What meaning is there in being queen if I cannot help him here considering how much he has aided me until this point?”

There was a fiery glow of certainty in her reddish-brown eyes as she murmured to herself.

To be continued in *The Ideal Sponger Life 10*.



Appendix — The Lord and Maids' Spread of Contamination

The lord and lady of the inner palace of Capua were Prince Consort Zenjirou and Queen Aura.

The person in charge of its running was, of course, Head Maid Amanda. She was trusted by both of the royals and was in command of not only the people working there but also the movements of goods and such.

Even the older maids in charge of each division would follow Amanda's commands if it came down to it. The younger maids would reflexively straighten if she so much as called their names. All of this was simply a matter of course. Amanda was an exceptionally talented maid and administrator in addition to being a harsh taskmaster.

One night, she called an urgent meeting for the division heads.

"We are in dire straits," she declared, slamming an open palm down on the table.

The younger maids would have hunched over at that point. Fortunately, the only people present had distinctly more spine at this point, as they each commanded a division of their own.

"Please explain in detail, Head Maid," Emilia—the maid in charge of the gardens—requested calmly.

Amanda complied, her tone calming considerably. "Very well. As I said, we are in dire straits. I imagine that you are all aware, but contamination is spreading through the inner palace. The spread is at a prodigious rate as well."

"Contamination? Do you mean dirt? That would fall under Ines's purview, then. Unfortunately, she is away at the moment."

There were four maids in charge of the various divisions, but only three of them were currently present. The single absentee was—as had just been said—

Ines, the head of cleaning. She was currently in the Twin Kingdoms in order to take care of Zenjirou. Her absence leading to dirt being missed was feasible, but that was unfortunately not what Amanda wanted to say.

“I do not. I am taking care of Ines’s duties, so there is no problem there. The issue is the contamination spreading among the young maids. Have none of you noticed the current situation?”

The other three exchanged looks before turning back to her in question.

“A contamination of the young maids?” Orajā asked.

“Ah, I feel like I know what you are trying to say,” Vanessa—the head of cooking—said with a reluctant smile. “The maids are being contaminated, but the source is separate, is it not?”

Amanda nodded firmly at Vanessa hitting the nail on the head. “Precisely. Emilia, Orajā, you should be warier. There were originally nine maids assigned to the inner palace and Sir Zenjirou.”

As time passed, the oldest three had left to get married. On top of that, three more maids were currently in the Twin Kingdoms with Zenjirou. In other words, only three members from the initial lineup were still in the inner palace. The rest were the new hires who had been brought on board that year.

Amanda let out a deep sigh. “It is hardly a surprise, but when the new maids do not understand something, they ask their seniors. They could ask me or any of you, but they will default to their seniors unless it is something extreme.”

“Well, that’s only natural. Whatever we may say, we are their superiors more than their colleagues. The younger maids won’t speak to us so lightly,” Vanessa commented.

She was correct, but that was precisely why Amanda had called their current situation dire and held this meeting.

“Indeed. The new girls are at no fault. However, this is an awful situation. The senior maids still within the palace are Faye, Dolores, and Letti!”

Faye, Dolores, and Letti...otherwise known as the three problem maids. The three *barely* cleared the minimum requirements to be seen as maids of the

inner palace and could be viewed as champions in a certain light. Those three problem maids were currently the new girls' only seniors and examples.

"The situation is dire indeed."

"'Contamination' is certainly a good way of putting it."

"Truly? We can simply dismiss the new girls if they fall."

Amanda's voice rose slightly once her three colleagues voiced their opinions. "The signs are already apparent with the toy of Sir Zenjirou's called a handheld game. He allows the maids to take it if they wish. None other than those three would originally take it, but the new girls are all willing to do so."

Only the problem maids would have had such an influence.

"Ah. Sir Zenjirou allows it, though, so surely it is not a problem?" Vanessa asked. She was relatively soft on the young maids. However, Amanda wouldn't let herself be diverted so easily.

"Of course it is. Those girls will one day return to the outer world as 'former maids of the inner palace.' If we mass-produce these problem maids and send them out into the world, the title will hold so much less weight than it currently does. We need to keep the number of them as low as possible," she said with a clenched fist.

"If you are concerned about the influence they have, why not dismiss the three of them?" Orajā suggested coldly. "Tackling the problem at its root is the norm."

Amanda shook her head at the simplest and—in a certain light—most correct solution, though. "We can't. While they have many small problems, they are just this side of acceptable. Sir Zenjirou is fondest of those three as well, so we cannot."

"Ah, true. In that respect, learning from the three of them is not exactly wrong for the inner palace as it currently is," Vanessa added with a rueful smile.

With the lord of the palace preferring such casual behavior, having more maids who acted in that way made sense. The problem was that the young maids would only work there for a short period, while they would carry the

reputation of the palace for far longer.

“I have a duty,” Amanda declared firmly. “A duty to train those girls well so that they do not bring shame on the name of the profession.” Her aim was actually for the young maids’ benefit as well.

“I feel like the inner palace is where the talented work rather than where the workers *become* talented,” Orajá commented sharply. She knew that Amanda was the one who decided the overall direction of the inner palace, though, so she wouldn’t say anything further about it.

“I need your aid. We need to investigate how much the influence has spread and deal with it while we can. We can still make it. We can!”

“Ah, right. So, how do you want us to help?”

“Very well, then.”

“If that is your decision, then we will of course follow it.”

The three division heads all worded it differently, but all showed their agreement.



The next day, a tall girl—Dolores—felt an indescribable sense of unease as she carried out her work.

“I wonder what it is?” she asked the others as she used a soft cloth to dust the electronics. “Things feel slightly different, almost tense. Or like I’m being watched...”

“Are you sure you’re not imagining it?” asked the smaller girl, Faye.

“Right, nothing’s different,” the sleepy-eyed and big-chested final member, Letti, agreed.

Idle chatter while they worked would usually get them scolded. But Ines was normally their supervisor here, and she was with Zenjirou in the Twin Kingdoms. Amanda—who was supervising in her stead—had said she had business to attend to and left. The three of them were therefore left to freely chat.

Dolores sighed at the answers from her two companions. “I shouldn’t have asked the two of you.”

Faye was just a fool and Letti was generally air-headed. Neither of them would notice extra attention around them.

Faye pouted and protested. “You always jump to mocking people like that. This is the inner palace. We don’t need to be that wary about things, do we?”

There was a long pause before Dolores answered. “I doubt there’s a single inner palace on the continent where you *don’t* need to be wary. In more ways than one,” she said eventually, ignoring her own shortcomings to poke at Faye for getting so comfortable with things.

There was no doubt that an inner palace was a place that required constant tension from the maids who worked within it, both in the sense of succeeding at their work and in avoiding possible feuds between the concubines who would call it home.

The husband and wife being the only two residents was a distinctly unique state of affairs. One of their lieges—Zenjirou—was even more *distinctly unique* as well. You could very well say that literally none of the norms of Capua’s inner palace were the case in any other.

“Right, I heard that normally the inner palace would be really sordid. I’m glad Sir Zenjirou is so dedicated to our queen.”

As Faye breathed a sigh of relief, letting her flat chest relax, Letti perked up and sent her own more generous chest bouncing.

“Oh? I heard Princess Freya was going to be a concubine, though. It’s not public yet, but it’s officially decided, right?”

The phrasing sounded at odds with itself but was a common saying when you were in the inner circle. Essentially, the information had yet to be announced, but everyone involved had made the necessary decisions, so preparations were underway.

“She’s from the Northern Continent, right?” Faye asked.

“Right. Princess Freya Uppasala is her full name. I’ve heard that we’re getting

more maids because we'll be attending to her needs as well."

Faye considered Dolores's explanation briefly before paling. "That means we might have to serve her rather than Sir Zenjirou? No way! She's going to live in an annex, right?!"

Her gaze landed on the various appliances around the room. It went without saying that any annex she lived in would not have electrical appliances. They wouldn't be able to drink chilled water whenever it got too hot, and it would be much harder to borrow the game console on their holidays.

In the midst of their—somewhat selfish for their station—concerns, a maid trotted into the room.

"My apologies for disturbing your work. I would like to ask you something."

The girl had a smooth gait and a trained body. This was one of the new maids, Louisa. She was carrying the LED lantern in both hands but her balance was almost unusually even.

Faye was overjoyed at one of her juniors asking for help and stood in front of her while puffing up her chest. "What is it? I'll teach you whatever I can. I'm your senior, after all."

Her small stature and baby face meant that she looked like a child playing around. Still, Louisa's serious expression didn't falter as she bowed.

"Thank you. I told Lady Oரா that this el-ee-dee lantern was dimmer than before and she instructed me to bring it here and change the batteries. Please show me how to do so."

Looks of understanding made their way onto all three of the problem maids' faces at her request.

"Yeah, that's something you need to be shown."

"If you tried to open it without knowing how, you might break it."

"Right, I'll show you how. Let's see..."

It was actually surprisingly different for someone who had no experience with electronics at all to change the batteries without even an instruction booklet.

“See, you spin this bit and you can take the back off, right? Then you can take these cylinders out. Those are the batteries. There are eight of them. I doubt you’d make the mistake, but make sure they’re all there. The little batteries inside the batteries have run out, so you replace them with ones that are charged.”

“These, right?”

“Thanks, Dolores.”

Zenjirou had shown Faye personally, so she changed the batteries with practiced movements.

“Once you’ve done that, you spin the thing from earlier the other way and you’re done. You can get it misaligned, so watch out for that. Then you need to charge the empty batteries.”

“Here, Faye.”

“Right, thanks, Letti.”

Faye then put the flat batteries into the charger and took them to the courtyard side of the room, to plug it into one of the sockets lined up there.

“Can you see? You put these in like that. It takes four at a time, so once the first four are in, you put these two metal pieces into these holes. You need to make sure they go all the way in. See how that orange light lit up when I did? They’re done when that light goes out. You put the second set of four in this bag. When the light goes out, do the same with these four. When they’re all done, put them in *this* bag and then into this drawer. Got it?”

“Indeed. Thank you for the instruction.”

Louisa straightened almost audibly after the explanation and bowed crisply. She then excused herself and left the room. Amanda was waiting quietly outside for her. Louisa showed no shock at the ambush, simply bowing.

“Give me your report. What did they tell you?”

“Very well, ma’am. Faye led the explanation and...”

Once Amanda had finished listening to the detailed and easily understandable—like a trained spy’s—report, she found herself surprised in a good way, with

slightly widened eyes.

“Very well. It would appear there are no issues. You may head back. Thank you, Louisa.”

“Excuse me, ma’am.”

Amanda put her hand to her chin as she watched the girl practically glide away.

“It was a fine, easily understandable explanation. At least on that front, they seem more together than Kate’s group. Perhaps even these problem maids truly feel the burden now that they have juniors relying on them?”

Despite her wishful thinking, that was unfortunately far from the case. The quality of Faye’s explanation was because it had to do with the electric appliances. The three were far more au fait than the others since they had no hesitation about taking advantage of Zenjirou’s kindness due to their curiosity.

Ordinarily, a maid would hesitate to touch these literally unique—and in some ways even more valuable than magic tools—items, however open-minded their master might be.

With the other maids being hamstrung by that psychological wall, it was perhaps inevitable that they would be far less familiar with it.

On top of that, Faye wanted to show off to her new junior, so she was in full “good senior mode.”

The combination of those two factors meant that this was an exception. Amanda would eventually become well aware of just how unusual it was.



Once the three of them were done with the living room, they started cleaning the bedroom.

While they were spending the most amount of time possible doing so, Mirella turned up.

“Excuse me, I have the fresh sheets,” she said, holding the thick bundle in both hands.

She had joined the staff at the same time as Louisa. Her language and behavior were both exceedingly refined. So much so that she seemed more like a noble girl wearing a maid outfit than an actual maid. Then again, it was far from abnormal for noble girls from major families to end up working in the inner palace.

Dolores quickly spoke to the girl as she stood with the armful of bedding in the doorway. "Thanks, Mirella. Leave them over there and we'll deal with them. You can head back."

The maid gave an elegant blink of surprise.

"Are you certain? Lady Oraja said that my job was not over until the sheets were in place."

Dolores looked regretfully up at the ceiling. "Guess there's no getting around it when she put it that clearly. Go ahead, then," she said with a deep sigh.

"Very well," Mirella replied, even as her senior's actions confused her. While she called it "her job," it really just involved putting the linens in the drawer. However unfamiliar she was with the task due to her upbringing, it didn't take long to complete. Having finished in a mere moment, she couldn't help but grow confused by the speed her three seniors were working at.

"Um, everyone, I can see you are making sure everything is perfectly clean, but should you?"

Dolores rose from her position on the floor, where she was gathering all the red hair and answered proudly, "Of course. Her Majesty is currently pregnant. Other than her official duties in the royal palace, she spends most of her time here. That's why we're spending the most time on it."

"I see. Pardon me for my doubts, then," Mirella apologized with an incline of her head, convinced by Dolores. She was still worried, though. "But do you have enough time? However important it is, will you not run out of time if you spend too much of it on the bedroom?"

Dolores wasn't the one to answer; this time, it was Faye, who had been constantly adjusting the position of the pillows.

"It's fine. We just cut the corners we can on the living room to finish it

quickly.”

“Pardon?”

“Faye!” Dolores panicked. “It’s not like that, Mirella. We’re not doing it to spend as much time in the air conditioning as possible. We’re doing this all for Her Majesty while she’s pregnan—”

“I will take my leave here, then,” Mirella said, apparently concerned that she’d end up an accomplice if she was there any longer. She bowed politely and then left.

“I can understand wanting to stay in here during the blazing season, though,” she murmured to herself on the way out.

Naturally, Amanda was waiting for her outside the living room.

“Report,” she commanded.

“Yes, ma’am. The three of them...”

When Mirella finished, Amanda covered her face with a palm and looked up at the ceiling. “Those girls... Once a problem maid, always a problem maid, it seems.”

“Um, Lady Amanda...”

“Don’t worry, Mirella. Return to your duties,” Amanda said, her usual severe look returning as Mirella looked at her with concern.



Night fell. Ordinarily, the maids on cleaning duty waited in the room next to the living room in case they were needed. However, with her pregnancy, Aura didn’t spend her time in the big living room. Instead, she stayed in the smaller but air-conditioned bedroom. Therefore, the maids were waiting in the living room instead, so there was only one door between them and the queen if they needed to answer a summons.

“Phew, the day’s finally over,” Dolores commented.

“It’s so hot too. I wonder if Her Majesty will summon us into the room soon.”

“Right. Let’s cope with something cold until then. Here.”

They kept their voices down as much as they could, but the three still made themselves very much at home on the sofa as Letti poured the mix of fruit juice, sugar, and iced water into wooden cups that were there for them.

Zenjirou *had* granted them permission to use the sofa and have food and drinks while they waited. The three of them were the only ones to take advantage of it so boldly, though.

“Excuse me,” came a voice after an unknown period of waiting. The voice belonged to a small girl with her black hair tied up in a short ponytail.

“Oh, Nilda, what’s wrong?” asked Letti in her usual relaxed voice when she noticed her.

Nilda approached much like a cautious hamster, with an utterly innocent smile on her face. “Today is the day I can borrow the game, so I came to collect it,” she said, clenching her fists in happiness in front of her chest. Anyone watching her do that would have been charmed.

“Oh, right. You got caught up in it too? It’s fun, right?” Faye asked her.

Nilda nodded several times. “It really is! If my roommates didn’t stop me, I might even stay up all night playing.”

Faye laughed. “Ah, you’ve not done that yet, then.”

“If you want to, then the days you’re on garden duty during the rainy season are the ones to go for,” Dolores told her. “The work finishes quickly, so you can manage to see out the day.”

“I see.” Nilda was so pure that she’d take even the bad advice from her seniors on board. She honestly admired them, listened to what they said, and smiled at them.

Having such a cute junior made even the three problem maids sweet on her.

“I know, Nilda,” Letti said with a clap. “Since you’re here, would you like to try something new?” She didn’t even wait for a reply before heading to the fridge.

“Food?” Nilda asked.

“That’s right. Sir Zenjirou asked me to give it to anyone willing to eat it to get their opinions.”

Letti's usual listlessness had vanished into the ether as she began pulling various things from the fridge. The most eye-catching was a lump of dark foam inside a metal bowl.

"What is that?" Nilda asked.

"Cream from goat milk," Letti replied. "I whipped it this afternoon."

The only sugar they had was brown sugar so the appearance suffered somewhat. Still, the characteristic goat's milk stench had abated and people other than Zenjirou and Margarete could try tasting it now.

Letti then moved from the fridge to the freezer, pulling out frozen strawberries.

"What are you going to do with those?" Nilda asked in wonder, having sat down on the sofa.

"This," Letti giggled. "Take that!"

She put the fruit in with the cream and then used a wooden pole like a pestle to carefully crush them.

Once they were paste, she mixed them into the cream. Before long, the impromptu strawberry ice cream was done.

Of course, the idea had come from Zenjirou. The brown sugar meant that the color was rather strange, but the mix of sweet, sour, and cold meant that the girls couldn't get enough of it.

Letti portioned it out into bowls, and all four of them used wooden spoons to ferry the dessert to their mouths.

"Guhhh," Dolores managed.

"This is..." Faye added.

"Yup, it turned out good," Letti said with satisfaction.

"Wow, this is so good, Letti."

All of them had blissful looks at the (almost) ice cream during the sweltering night.

"There's plenty more, so eat up."

“Thank you,” Nilda said, smiling happily as she was surrounded by her kind seniors. Once she’d eaten the ice cream and taken the game console, Nilda didn’t head back to her own room. Instead, she answered the summons to go to the head maid’s office.

“Nilda, report what happened in the living room,” Amanda instructed.

“Right, ma’am.”

The seniors had been so bold that Nilda didn’t see anything wrong with their behavior, smiling innocently as she explained.

“...and then Letti made ice cream. It was delicious.”

She’d gone to borrow her master’s things and had a midnight snack while she was at it. Seeing that there wasn’t an ounce of guilt on the girl’s face, Amanda looked like she’d bitten into a lemon.



“And so it seems that *you’re* the one most corrupted... I wonder how I should apologize to the margrave,” she murmured softly.

“Uh? Did you say something, ma’am?” Nilda asked, unable to hear it even from her position directly in front of the woman.

Amanda spent a while considering how she should warn her cousin’s daughter as the girl looked questioningly up at her.



The next day dawned early. Faye, Dolores, and Letti had all been summoned to the head maid’s office.

Faye was on guard from the summons, while Letti was afraid. On the other hand, Dolores looked almost regretful already despite nothing having been said yet. Amanda considered a proper lecture might well be in order.

With those thoughts in mind, Amanda slowly began the discussion. “Do you girls have any idea why you have been summoned here?”

“No,” Faye answered.

“I apologize, but neither do I,” Dolores admitted.

“I don’t know,” Letti finished up.

The three all shook their heads as they spoke.

Whether it was because they truly had no idea or didn’t want to implicate themselves with a careless statement, none of them said a thing.

Having somewhat expected that, Amanda gave an exaggerated sigh.

“It is due to your behavior with the new maids,” she told them before fixing the trio with a glare.

They still seemed confused.

“How we’ve behaved with the new maids?”

“Did we do something wrong with them?”

“We were trying to be nice to them. Did we offend one of them?”

This time, the head maid let out a real sigh. They truly didn’t know why they

were there. “Of course you’ve done something wrong. What senior teaches her juniors how to avoid work and what pleasantness there is within the inner palace?!”

The three immediately launched into apologies.

“Ah, right. I apologize.”

“We didn’t think deeply enough.”

“We are sorry.”

However, they were clearly apologizing for angering her, not because they understood that they had done wrong. Amanda couldn’t be too harsh on them either because of the cruel reality that Zenjirou would appreciate the maids acting this way.

She remained silent for a moment. A frontal attack would do nothing here. She had no choice but to accept that, so she switched to the carrot.

“Incidentally, have the three of you heard yet? There will be another person living here next year at the earliest. The year after, at the latest.”

“Yes.”

“We have heard the rumors.”

“Princess Freya, right?”

Amanda nodded. “Indeed. That will inevitably mean that the inner palace will see both an annex and the main area in use. We maids who care for Sir Zenjirou and Her Majesty will be split to also take care of Her Highness and the annex.”

She cleared her throat as the three of them watched her attentively before making things clear.

“When that happens, I intend to have you three remain here with Sir Zenjirou. I dislike it, but he is fond of the way you act.”

The three of them let out inarticulate noises of happiness. It was inevitable. The inner palace was heaven due to the appliances and attitude that Zenjirou brought to the table. They would happily avoid working in the annex.

Seeing right through them, Amanda continued. “However, if the new maids

learn to act in the same way, that will no longer be necessary. Those three will be more than capable of taking over.”

Their reaction was dramatic.

“Our apologies. We shan’t teach them in that way again,” Faye said immediately.

“Please make sure to train them exactly how they should be maids of the inner palace,” Dolores added.

“We’ll take care of Sir Zenjirou,” said Letti, finishing up.

There was a long pause as Amanda sighed hard enough to completely empty her lungs.

“I will be expecting that from you,” she said after a moment.

THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE

9

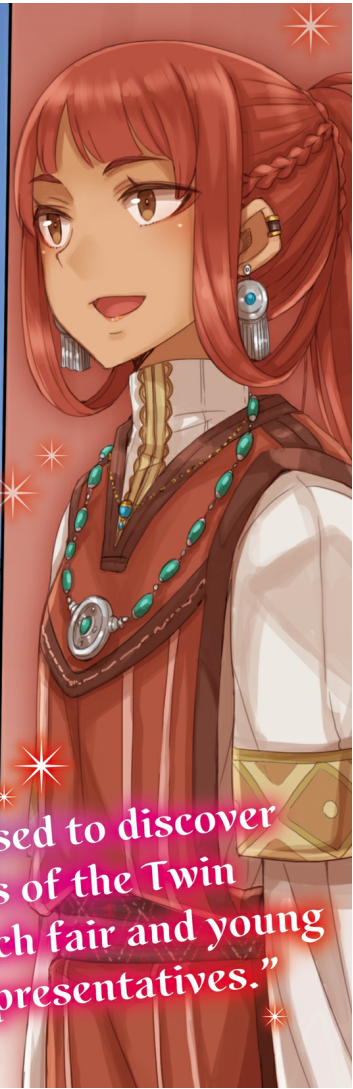
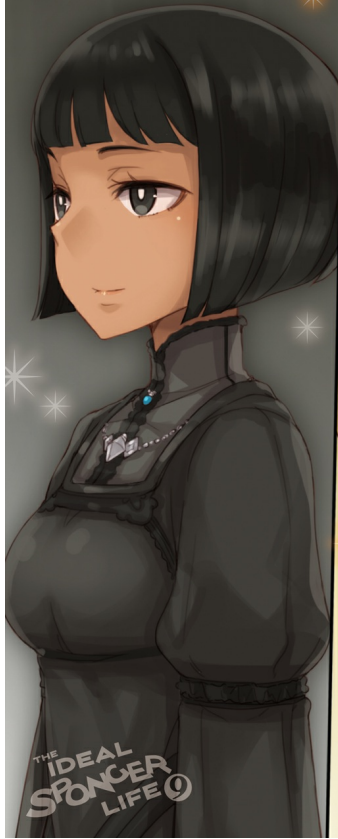
Illustrator:
**Jyuu
Ayakura**

Author:
**Tsunehiko
Watanabe**

“Apologies
for the wait,
Lucretia.”



The red-haired Shuura,
gray-haired Nazeema,
blonde Talajeh, and
black-haired Fiqriya...
All four were beautiful
in their own right.

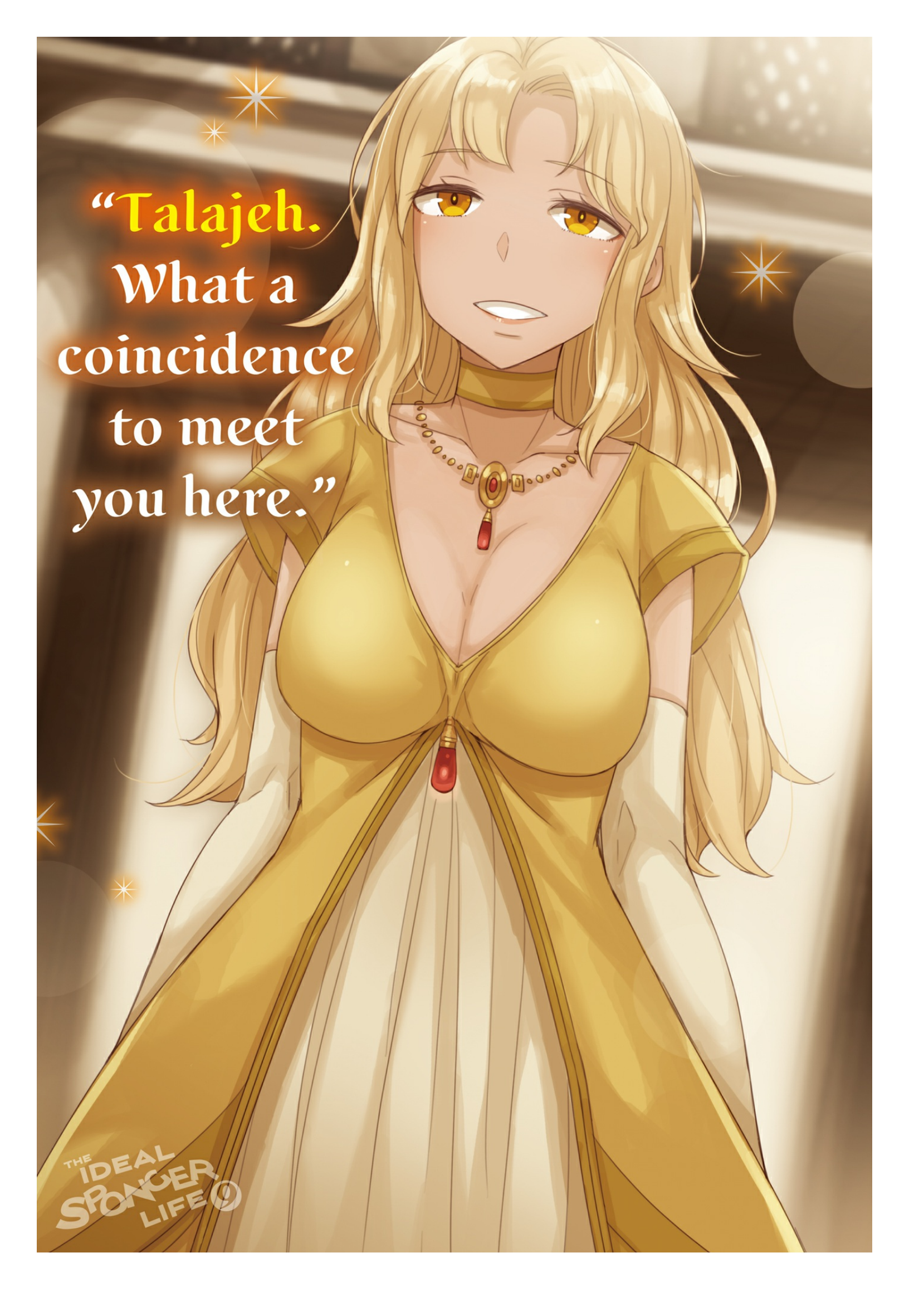


“I was quite surprised to discover
that the four dukes of the Twin
Kingdoms have such fair and young
women as their representatives.”

Zenjirou was
greeted by
the sight of
his wife's
smile for the
first time in
a month.

“Good
morning.
Sleep
well?”





“Talajeh.
What a
coincidence
to meet
you here.”

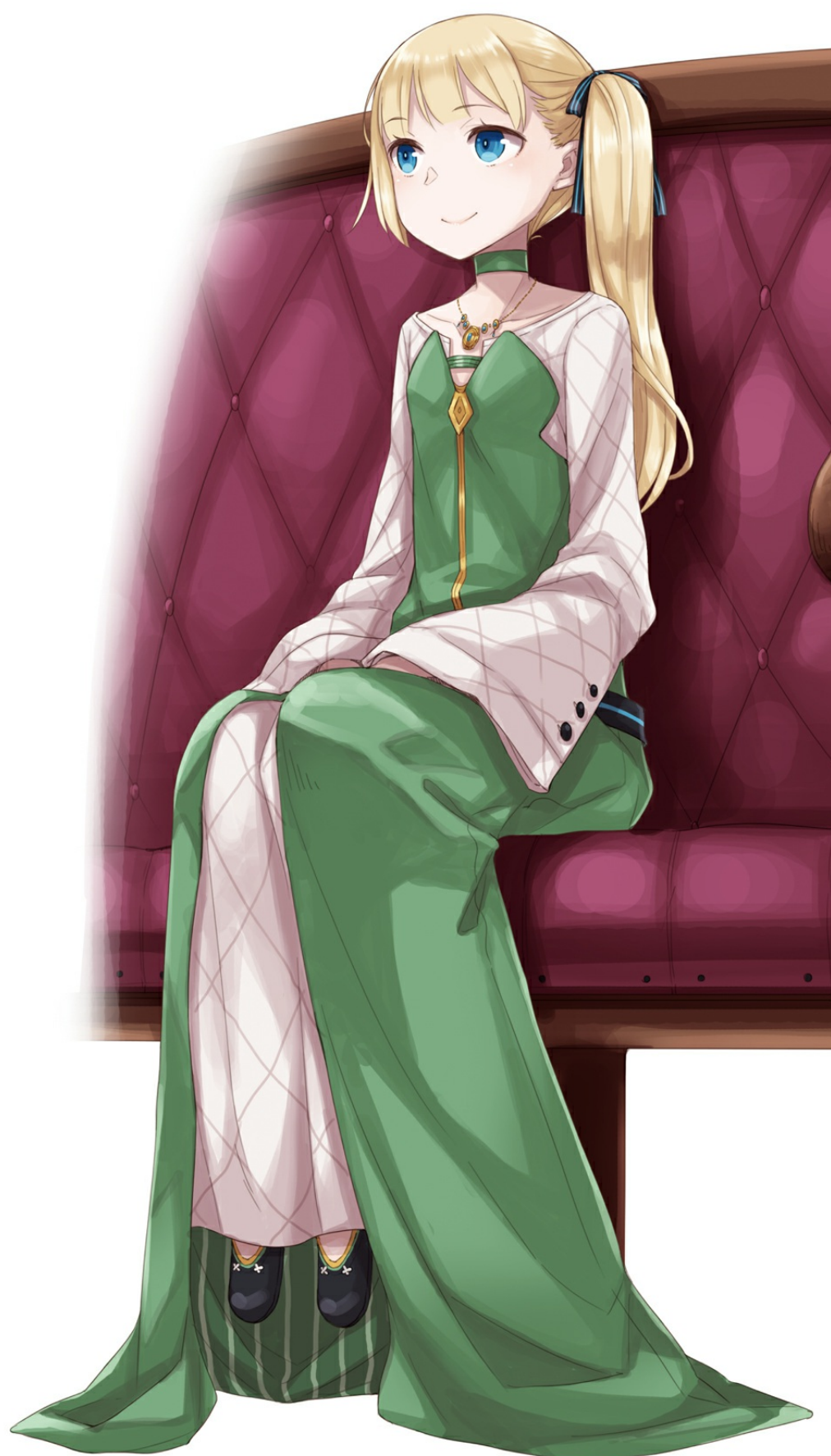


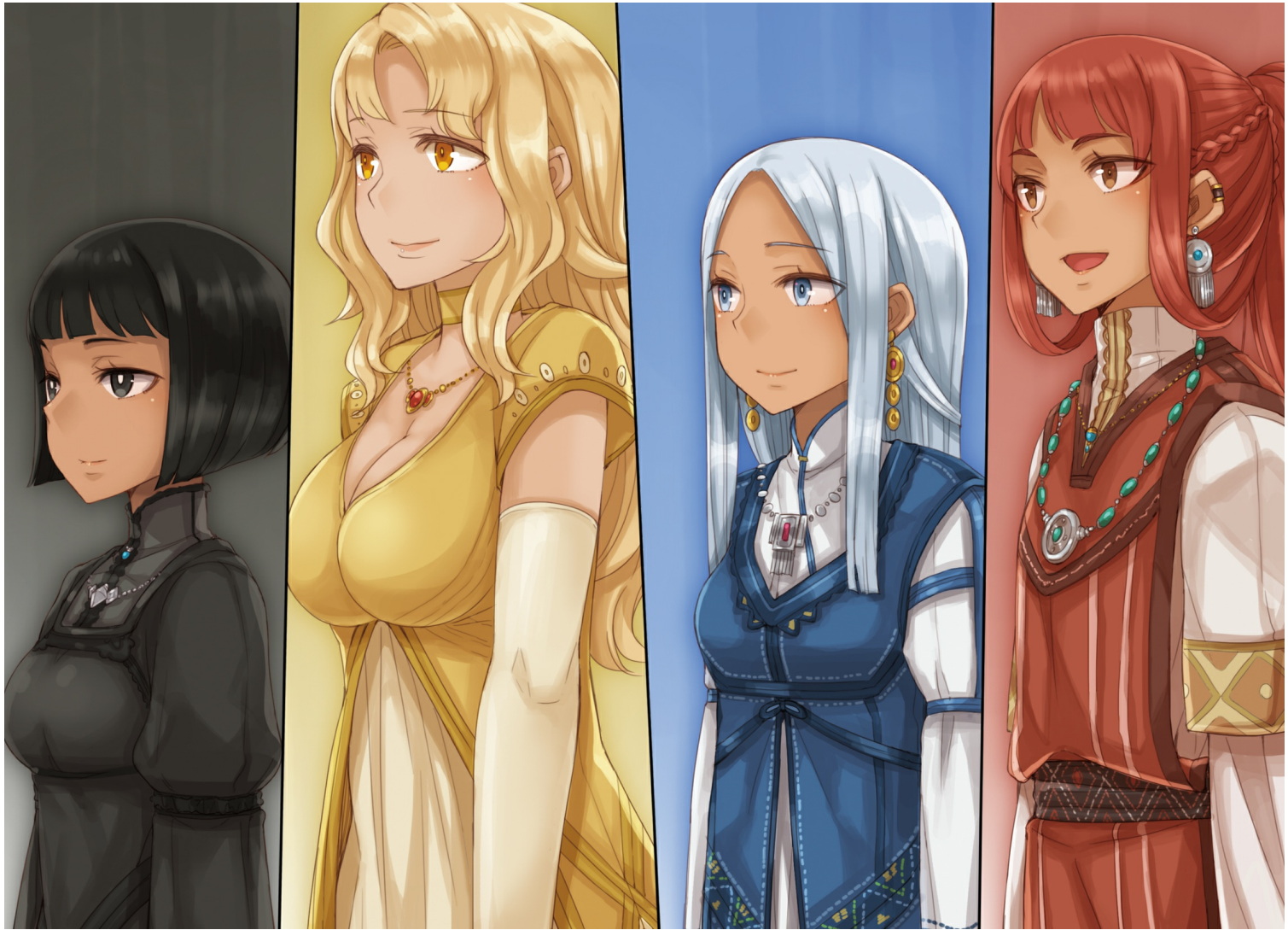
**“Wow.
No
matter
what
they try,
Capua
can’t
match
that.”**

Zenjirou was
wearing mostly red
formalwear and
escorting Lucretia,
who was wearing
a green dress.

THE
IDEAL
SPONGER
LIFE ©



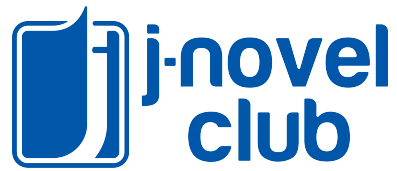












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RISOU NO HIMOSEIKATSU

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